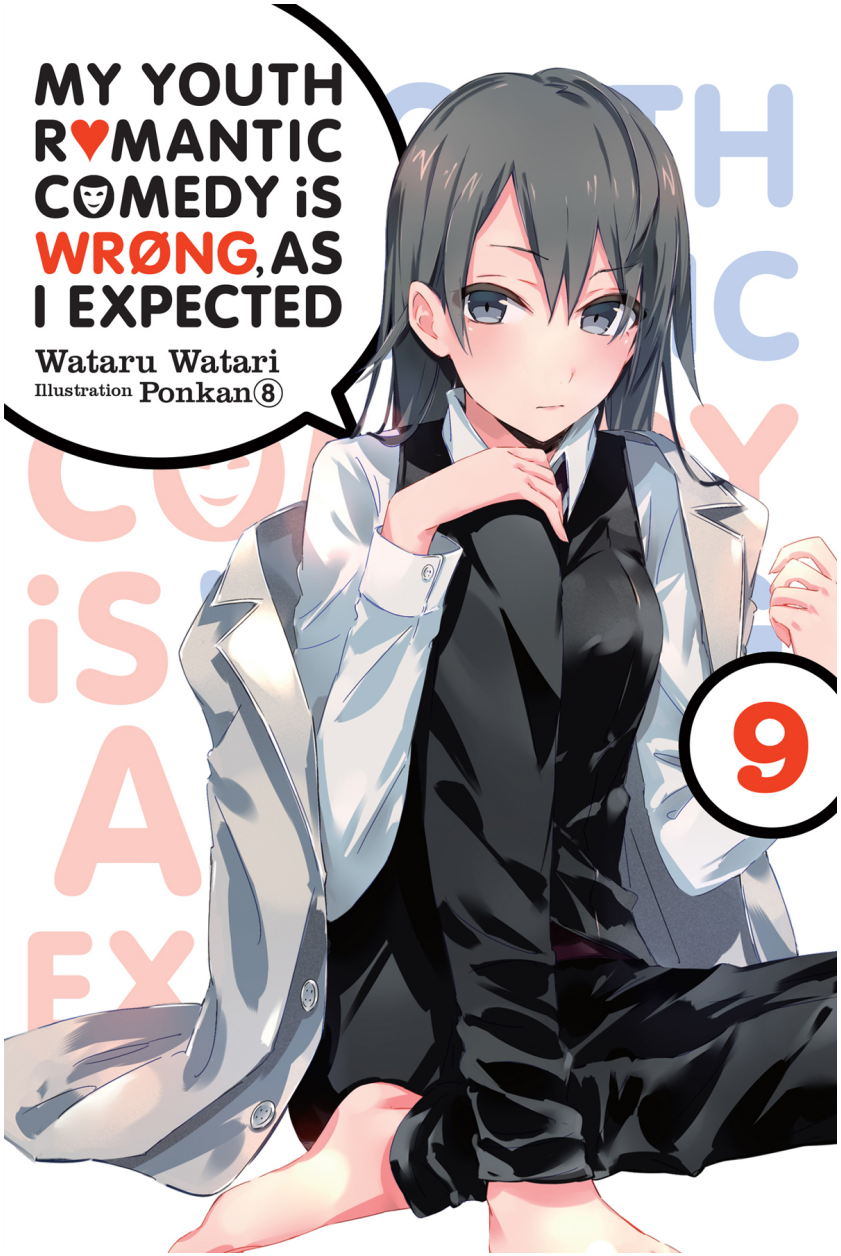
MY YOUTH ROMANTIC COMEDY IS WRONG, AS I EXPECTED

Wataru Watari

Illustration Ponkan⑧



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Translation Notes

Yukino
Yukinoshita

Yui
Yuigahama
Yumiko
Miura

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VOLUME
9

YEN ON
NEW YORK

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MY YOUTH ROMANTIC COMEDY IS WRONG, AS I EXPECTED
Vol. 9
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Cast of Characters

Hachiman Hikigaya..... The main character. High school second-year. Twisted personality.

Yukino Yukinoshita..... Captain of the Service Club. Perfectionist.

Yui Yuigahama..... Hachiman's classmate. Tends to worry about what other people think.

Saika Totsuka..... In tennis club. Very cute. A boy, though.

Saki Kawasaki..... Hachiman's classmate. Sort of a delinquent type.

Hayato Hayama..... Hachiman's classmate. Popular. In the soccer club.

Kakeru Tobe..... Hachiman's classmate. An excitable character and member of Hayama's clique.

Yumiko Miura..... Hachiman's classmate. Reigns over the girls in class as queen bee.

Hina Ebina..... Hachiman's classmate. Part of Miura's clique, but a slash fangirl.

Iroha Isshiki..... Manager of the soccer club. First-year student who was elected student council president.

Kaori Orimoto..... Went to Hachiman's middle school. Student at Kaihin High School.

Shizuka Hiratsuka..... Japanese teacher. Guidance counselor.

Haruno Yukinoshita..... Yukino's older sister. In university.

Komachi Hikigaya..... Hachiman's little sister. In her third year in middle school.

0

But **that room** continues to play out their routine endlessly.

The wind was rattling the windowpane. The ocean was close, and with no tall buildings around, there was nothing to slow the wind as it blew through.

The sound drew my eyes to the scene beyond the window.

Bare of their foliage, the trees swayed in a dry wind that swept up dust and sand. The smattering of pedestrians walking by pulled their jacket collars close and hunched their shoulders.

Winter had arrived at the school. The same season had come last year, too, but I'd never known gusts so cold.

The sound of the wind was soon joined by voices.

"So, like, it's been super-dry, right? Yumiko brought in this little humidifier, and it's just puffing and puffing all through class! Lately, they have those…USJ…USA things? Like, those plug things? You know!" Yuigahama said fervently with animated gestures.

Watching her with a smile, Yukinoshita nodded. "Yes, they're quite convenient," she remarked before falling silent.

Yukinoshita isn't normally a big chatterbox, so her brevity wasn't all that strange. But I couldn't bring myself to look straight at her smile.

Without a word, I dropped my gaze to the floor. Directly in my line of sight were Yuigahama's toes, turning to point in my direction. "Right? So I was thinking I'd like to put one in the clubroom, too. Hey, Hikki? …Hikki?" Her whole body was probably facing me at this point. She repeated herself, waiting for my response.

Lost in my thoughts, I was a little late to reply. To fill up that silence, I deliberately sighed in exasperation before I answered, "… I'm listening. It's USB. Why would we have to get electricity from America?"

"Oh! That's it!" Yuigahama replied with a clap of her hands. And then, without waiting for a reaction from either of us, she

immediately launched back into her speech. “Now you can charge cell phones by plugging in those USB things, and it’s super-convenient, y’know? Lately, my battery has been running out in no time at all.” She moved the conversation along, and this time it shifted to getting a new cell phone.

That kept the discussion continuing without pause. However, although the words never ended, there was a lack of continuity in both the conversation and its foundation.

An image hit me—this conversation was like drifting ice seen from afar. Was that due to the swaying tree branches I could see through the windows? It seemed like one wrong step would send us sinking forever into the deepest depths.

There was no calendar in the clubroom, but I didn’t have to check. I knew the date. Checking it was akin to counting down your days left to live.

We were already nearing mid-December. Two more weeks, and it would be New Year’s. This year would be over.

All things must come to an end, and there is no taking back days past.

Gazing at the setting sun, I felt conscious of the year’s closing.

Of course, the sun had always set, and the months had passed in exactly the same way. Was the sun today any different from the day before? No, and it never had been. In the end, it was just more of the same. Only the consciousness of those watching it had changed.

I—no, we—had most certainly realized the presence of a visible end, and that was what gave this entirely common sunset such sentimentality.

But if time was a river flowing by, this room was a frozen island.

Ever since the student council elections, our time spent in this clubroom had not changed one bit. We continued with conversations that could only be described as empty, with nothing there but the feeling that something was off, like we were walking on thin ice.

“I’ve been thinking it’s cold, but, like, I guess Christmas is right around the corner…” Yuigahama brought up yet another topic.

And Yukinoshita and I joined in, giving our trivial responses: “Yeah, it’s cold,” “It’s gotten colder,” and “It’ll be even chillier tomorrow.”

But Yuigahama must have sensed this topic had hit a roadblock, as she jerked forward and pushed the conversation on quickly. “Ah! If we asked Miss Hiratsuka for a heater, maybe we could get one in here!”

“I really think that’s unlikely.” Yukinoshita smiled wryly, her calm unperturbed by Yuigahama’s enthusiasm.

“She’d be more likely to give herself a present first.” Or rather, I feel like her greatest priority is making a present of herself to someone. Someone accept her, seriously.

After these unenthusiastic replies from the both of us, Yuigahama’s energy waned a little, too. “Oh… Yeah, I guess so…” Her shoulders sagged slightly in disappointment.

At that point, it kind of felt like her string of efforts was done.

Yukinoshita and I had never been big talkers in the first place, and it wasn’t as if we had any topics to contribute to a casual conversation. So lately, Yuigahama had often taken the lead in conversations. The subject matter was normally casual and harmless. Killing time can be rather tricky.

It seemed to me Yuigahama had gotten better at finding opportunities to start a conversation.

No, that’s not quite right.

I think she’s been good at things like this since before joining the Service Club. She’s probably spent a lot of time cultivating her social abilities—reading people’s moods, filling in silences, smoothing over situations, and ignoring past negative experiences.

Maybe it was kind of like how I had this book open that I wasn’t even reading right then.

The lines of characters and time flowed on by. I offered an occasional comment to the conversation, but I was also sort of ignoring it. Then I happened to look over at the clock. If today was going to be the same as the past few days, then it would be about time for Yukinoshita to prompt us to go home.

The others must have realized that, too. Yuigahama looked out the window and up at the sky. “It’s gotten dark, huh?”

“…It has. Let’s leave it here for the day.” Taking Yuigahama’s words as her cue, Yukinoshita closed her book and put it away in her bag. Yuigahama and I got ready to depart as well and stood up.

The clubroom went dark all at once when we turned off the lights, and leaving the room only led to more darkness. After walking wordlessly down the hushed, chilly hallway, we left

through the front entrance.

The sun had already set, and the lights filtering out of the school building seemed forlorn. The afterglow of the sunset didn't reach the shadows of the school. The darkness of night already covered the side where we were.

With the artificial light of a streetlamp at her back, Yuigahama waved. "Well, I'm taking the bus!" she called out with her arm raised.

"Okay," I answered, before my feet took me toward the bicycle parking.

Left behind, Yukinoshita watched us go with a farewell. "Yes, good-bye."

It was too dark to really see her face, but Yukinoshita was probably still smiling faintly. Yukinoshita quietly hefted the weight of her bag on her shoulder, which mussed up her scarf around her neck. She adjusted that, too. Those sedate gestures were the only things about her that made her seem unchanged from before.

"See you." I responded with that brief farewell and hurried to the bicycle parking so I could avoid looking at her.

But no matter how I tried not to stare, her expression wouldn't leave my mind.

Her smile hadn't changed since that day.

In an attempt to shake the image out of my head, I pedaled my bike as hard as I could.

You get used to taking part in situations, you become a part of them, and then they come apart.

Eventually, even situations like this end up in a little package labeled *mundane* and sink to the bottom of your recollection, where you'll most certainly call them *memories* in order to rationalize them.

People say that time heals all wounds.

That's not true, though. Time is a slow-acting poison. It slowly erodes the events of the past, ending them, making you resigned to them.

As I was flying through the town on my bicycle, the decorative lights that illuminated the houses caught my eye. Like Yuigahama had said, Christmas would be here soon.

When I was little, I'd only ever thought of Christmas as a day when I'd get what I wanted. Well, it's kind of, like, backwardly compatible with birthdays.

But now it's different. I'm not a little kid anymore, and I'm not going to get any presents, either.

Most of all—

I don't wish for anything—or want anything anymore.

I'm sure I won't even be allowed to want anything.

Iroha Isshiki

Birthday

April 16

Special skills:

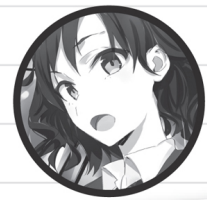
Flattery

Hobbies:

Making sweets, practicing self-improvement

How I spend my weekends:

Managing the soccer club, shopping, hanging out with boys



Kaori Orimoto

Birthday

February 21

Special skills:

Chatting up anyone and everyone

Hobbies:

Photography, cycling

How I spend my weekends:

Working a part-time job, cycling

Komachi's Christmas
Tosho Card
Gift Card
Household Appliances
…But what Komachi wants most is your happiness, Big Bro! **Eee!** That was worth a whole lot of Komachi points!
K H
Wish List
Also… we're out of detergent, so please buy some on your way back. ♡

1

Once again, **Iroha Isshiki** knocks on the door.

…What an idiot.

No one but me could hear my silent grumble as I took a seat in the classroom, right before the start of class.

The writing on a letter tucked sneakily into my bag was familiar. It seemed my little sister, Komachi, had written this for me.

On this adorable letter paper decorated with glitter, sparkling like snow, in Christmas-associated colors was a wish list that was as uncute as you could get.

Well, the last part was probably her real point: to buy detergent on my way home. *This is one of those "Komachi jokes"…right? If not, it wouldn't be a list of things so easily converted into cash, right? Yikes, my sister is so scary!*

Anyway, ignoring the first three things on that list, I'd make sure to buy some detergent on the way home.

But while I could ignore the earlier items, what was written after that stuck in my heart.

—My happiness.

Just what the hell is that?

What is happiness, after all…? A home with good soy sauce? Wait—then I've already got that! I'm glad I was born in Chiba! Chiba's soy sauce is number oooone in Japaaaan! (In production volume, at least.)

Oh man, that was close. If I hadn't been born in Chiba, that question might have led me down a less pleasant train of thought. Thank you, Kikkoman. Which reminds me, I wonder what the *kikko* in *Kikkoman* is. "Eternally seventeen years old"? Come on.

If I didn't crack jokes like that (with a bit of regional pride thrown in), I'd be too embarrassed to look straight at Komachi's note. She must have felt the same way, which was why she'd gone to the trouble of tacking it on as an apparent afterthought. We're very similar siblings.

But since she'd given this letter to me, it seemed she had worries of her own.

Komachi had also been involved with the string of events connected to the student council election not long ago. Or rather, I'd asked her to help out.

I still don't know whether that was a good idea.

Perhaps out of consideration for my feelings, Komachi never asked me in detail about how things had turned out in the end, and, well, even if she did try to give me the third degree, I couldn't explain it well anyway. I'd just end up grumpy. And I really, really didn't want that to lead to another fight.

Komachi understood that, and I think that's exactly why she was using such an indirect method of showing her concern. She really is a mature little sister.

Since my little sister wished for it, I would have liked to give her the moon and the stars and all the other Sailor Scouts, but unfortunately, I didn't have the money. In fact, I didn't even have a way to grant Komachi's joking request.

Hachiman Hikigaya's happiness, Hachiman Hikigaya's wish, Hachiman Hikigaya's desire—I've never sat down and thought about it before.

What is happiness to me? What do I want? I have no clue.

If it's possible for me to wish for something, as Komachi has wished for me… If someone would actually hear a wish like that… If a wish like that would be allowed…

Then I…

…I'd wish for Komachi's happiness! I'd wish for the fortune of my pretty, cure-cure lovely honey princess and do a happiness charge!

But because she was my adorable little sister, I had to avoid causing trouble for her, especially now. She was studying for her entrance exams.

I didn't want to make her worry unnecessarily or rob her of her time at this important juncture.

Leaving all that stuff about my happiness aside for the time

being, I folded up the letter and tucked it into my uniform pocket. The note almost felt warm. *Oh man, I like Komachi too much, don't I? It's okay; I'm in the clear because she's my sister. No, wait, that actually makes it less acceptable…*

Because grinning at a letter from my little sister would be a pretty weird thing to do, I stretched my back and adjusted my collar. You know, I really have to protect my aloof image. But just so you know, even if you intend to be aloof, often others will just see you as a miserable person, so you need to be careful (speaking from experience).

While I was killing time rereading Komachi's note, morning homeroom was closely approaching. My classmates were rushing into the room.

As this was going on, I happened to see a girl walking toward me in a particularly languid manner, as if she didn't give a damn about the bell. Her bluish-black hair swayed with each stride.

Kawa-something… No, was it Yama-something? Or was it Toyo-something? Well, Something-kawatoyo is fine. Kawa-something headed for her own seat as if she were completely uninterested in the rest of the classroom. On her way, her cool, composed gaze collided with mine.

We made wordless eye contact for a while, and then, for some reason, we both froze up.

It wasn't as if we didn't know each other, so I figured I'd say hi, at least—even if I didn't know her name. She also had helped out in that recent student council election. And I hadn't said thanks for that. I knew I should say *something*, but I couldn't figure out the right way to do it.

"Uh…so, like…" In the attempt to start a conversation, I breathed out some air and some equally meaningless words.

She must have thought she had to say something, too, and her lips moved uncomfortably until finally settling on a quiet "… Morning." She was scowling.

"Y-yeah," I replied to her greeting.

That weak start meant I could hardly get any words out, and no further conversation developed. She strode off quickly to her own seat at the back by the window.

Well, that moment of silence had made things awkward. Times like that, it's best to flee. And since I'd been sitting in my own seat, she should be the one to act.

Either from a lack of sleep or a lack of energy, as soon as Kawa-something took her seat, she flopped down face-first on her desk, and as I watched her, I calmly thought back on the exchange we'd just had.

…Whoa there, for real? Kawa-something came to say hi to me, when both of us hardly remember each other's names. That's some serious progress, huh?

Still, even elementary school kids can manage a greeting. In fact, they're even taught to go out of their way to greet suspicious individuals. Looking at it that way, I suddenly have a theory that she came to greet me as a preemptive attack against a creep! It's sorta like that thing where someone goes, *What the hell are you lookin' at? Which middle school are ya from, huh, punk?*

Well, it's a given that someone would want to fire a jab at any creep who would be smiling at a letter from his little sister. But hold on there—if my memory serves me right, I get the feeling she has also smiled over a text from her little brother, Taishi Kawasaki. Oh, right! That's her name. Kawasaki.

…Oh man, what the heck; she's a creep! From now on, I'll go say hello to her, too, to keep her at bay.

Greetings are really important.

Building a surveillance society through greetings! (This week's slogan.)

This world where greetings are not to be feared at all, much less a hello from a girl who might trick you into believing she actually likes you—it's poison.

Since I was already watching Kawasaki, I scanned the rest of the classroom, too, chin resting on my hands.

There was no clear change in my classmates, but the scenery around us had transformed slightly. Winter coats and scarves were stuffed into the lockers at the back, and someone had even placed an electric kettle there. Most of the girls had blankets draped over their knees, covering their legs.

But there was one girl in the class who was much more liberal about exposing them: Yumiko Miura.

Twisting a loose curl of her golden hair around her finger, she leisurely folded her long, slender legs the other way. It made the hem of her short skirt flutter.

With real effort, I restrained the thoughtless downward tug of my eyes, controlling myself so her skin only barely entered my field

of vision. *Wait, that's not self-control; I did see them. Oh, but hold on a minute! She let her guard down, sitting that way, so the view is just…*, I thought but then noticed something kind of like smoke wafting around Miura. *What is this, censor steam? Are they going to make sure to remove it on the Blu-ray?*

I never usually open my eyes all the way to begin with, but I was thinking maybe if I narrowed them even more, I could get a glimpse of something (something pink), when I discovered the tiny device that was spitting out that smoke. *Oh, is that the humidifier Yuigahama mentioned?* It was indeed puffing. It was kind of like the fog you get when an enemy character shows up.

Miura reigned like a queen that day as usual, her handmaidens Yuigahama and Ebina ever at her side.

"Yumiko, aren't you cold?" Ebina asked with concern.

Miura brushed aside the golden hair she'd been twirling and smiled, full of confidence. "Not really? This is normal." But despite her bravado, Miura sneezed a little *choo!* At her embarrassed expression, Yuigahama and Ebina gave warm little smiles.

Uh-huh, I'm kinda getting warm feelings, too.

Contrasted with Miura and her bare-legged appeal, Ebina and Yuigahama wore their gym pants underneath their skirts. Hey, that's no fun for the viewers! Cut it out, come on.

…Wait, but hold on a minute. When you consider how only high school girls wear things like that, I kinda start to think it's fine, for what it is. The mysterious ensemble that arises from the mismatched combination of a short skirt with incredibly lame gym pants—isn't it that very secrecy that lets the wings of imagination soar on the brilliance of what lies deep within? You're all my wings! You can't underestimate the power of a boy's imagination!

But the nearby boys must not have been interested in things of that nature; they didn't even look at the girls' gym pants. Sheesh, my generation is so lacking in imagination; it's terrible. Well, I'm not saying to force yourself to stare, so it is what it is.

But when I observed them closely, I thought a lack of imagination wasn't the reason they didn't take notice.

I don't know if I could call this proof of that, but Tobe was brushing up and tugging on the overlong hair at the back of his neck as he anxiously rocked back and forth. With each movement, his gaze flicked around the group. He struck me as rather uncomfortable.

He looked at Hayama, he looked at the girls, and then he looked back toward Ooka and Yamato.

"Man, it's cold as hell lately," Tobe said.

"For sure," Yamato responded with a nod, while Ooka sighed dramatically.

"Going to practice on a day like this is, like, not a thing, man."

"Yeah, that's a thing, huh, man?"

Is it a thing, or isn't it…? If it means exactly the same thing to exist or not, I'm gonna have to think the world really is guided by the Law of Cycles.

With a frivolous smile and going, "Like, right?" as if seeking agreement, he turned to Hayama and the girls.

Aside from a little smile, Hayama offered no particular reply.

Miura must have witnessed that exchange, but she merely glanced over at Hayama and said nothing.

From a distance, Hayama's clique might not have seemed all that different from normal. In fact, if I had overlooked this exchange, I'd have thought the same.

But there was a definite divide there.

They were all together, but they were not actually interacting.

I finally realized it wasn't that Tobe and the guys were completely ignoring the girls. It was *because* they were paying attention that they were trying not to look.

On the very surface, their relationship was the same as always, but it was nevertheless clearly different.

This was probably because there was a strange sense of distance between the two who should have been in the middle, the master pieces, Hayama and Miura. If there was a divide between the main boy and the main girl, then obviously, a gap would emerge between both parties.

Nobody said that out loud.

But the act of not putting it into words spoke volumes of the distance between them and pushed them further apart in the process.

Did something happen between them? It's not like Miura's ignoring Tobe because she hates him, right? Aw, what the heck, poor guy! Just like me!

I don't think Tobe was the cause. Miura had the double date from the other day on her mind. Most people would figure that since this was Hayama, it'd be nothing for him to hang out with

girls from other schools, but it seemed she perceived the situation a little differently.

With Hayama, you don't expect to hear gossip about him fooling around with other girls, for sure. In fact, I think he keeps girls he doesn't know well at arm's length.

Perhaps that was exactly why Miura was upset about having seen him with other girls with her own eyes.

Miura and I probably see different people in Hayama. So that means the Hayama she knows is not someone who does things like that.

…*Oh, I kinda feel bad.* After all, it was my fault Hayama was with those other girls, and it was his involvement with me that was giving Miura this weird anxiety. But she had involved herself and meddled, so I didn't feel like all of this was on me. Then again, it's not as if Miura had done something bad, either… I'd also seen her (pink) panties recently, which accelerated my apologetic feelings toward her.

When Miura isn't cheery, the mood with their whole clique really sours. But Miura wasn't the only one who was off.

Yuigahama was also acting a bit different from usual. She listened with a silent smile to Tobe chatting with the other guys, and she also played a passive role in Miura and Ebina's discussion while skillfully prompting them to continue.

She was different from how she was in the clubroom.

She wasn't the one who felt the need to talk, and she wasn't trying to jumpstart a conversation, either. Most noticeably, she wasn't spending lots of time trying to draw out reactions and emotions from others.

Perhaps right now, Yuigahama felt more peace of mind being with this group. I'm sure the clubroom was no longer a relaxing place for her to be.

That fact was a heavy weight on my chest.

Their group's conversation was starting to flounder, but Tobe chafed at the silence, exhaling a voiceless breath that continued into words. "…So, like. It's so cold lately. *Literally* freezing!"

Tobe! That's the same thing! You brought up the exact same thing as before! Even if weather is the number one thing to bring up when you don't know what to talk about, you really are overusing it… It's like, Gondo, Gondo, rain Gondo!

Ooka and Yamato reacted similarly to last time.

“Well, it is winter now.”

“Right?”

The guys’ conversation was so similar, it went beyond preestablished harmony and made me wonder if the world was in a time loop. But this time, Tobe was going to switch things up. Well, not like I really know how he is normally. Sorry, I don’t really give a damn about Tobe, okay?

“Hey, what’re you doing for Christmas and stuff?”

Why is he talking to Hayama but pointing his ears at Ebina?

Ebina picked up on this, I think, and took the initiative. “I’ll be busy getting ready for the year end.”

Oh, of course. There is that winter festival held around Ariake.

That made sense to me, so I was nodding to myself when Miura twitched, showing a spark of interest in something. Her hand finally stopped playing with her hair. “Christmas, huh…? Ebina’s got that thing, but…what about all you guys?” As she spoke, her gaze flicked over to Hayama, then immediately disengaged again. She was restless, squeezing and then smoothing the hem of her skirt underneath her desk. There may have been a faint blush (pink) on her cheeks, too.

Ohhh, nice! You can do it, Miura! …Why am I finding myself cheering for Miss Queen? Oh, I’m not cheering for Tobe, though.

But my support was in vain. Hayama tilted his head slightly. “I’m kinda busy, too…”

“Huh?” Miura must not have expected that answer. “H-Hayato… Y-you have some kind of plans?” she asked, stuttering a little.

“Hmm? …Yeah, family business,” Hayama replied, and his smile then was his usual warm one, not the listless one he’d been wearing earlier in the conversation.

“H-huh…” Miura looked away from him and pretended not to care, but her hand started fiddling with her hair again. Her fidgeting meant she obviously wanted to ask something, but she never managed it.

Once the two of them were done talking, the boys and the girls were divided again. Their topics of conversation naturally diverged as the boys chattered animatedly about what their club was doing over the winter vacation, while the girls’ topic shifted to Christmas shopping.

It seemed Tobe was unwilling to let the discussion go that way,

as he aggressively brushed up his hair, then stuck up a finger and swept his gaze over all of them. “S-so then, like—! The first shrine visit of the year or something?”

Tobe seemed to be doing his best to return to the last topic of discussion. Hayama had once said Tobe was good at setting an upbeat mood, and he wasn’t kidding… Though Tobe seems empty-headed, he’s surprisingly attentive to others. Or maybe he instinctively sensed it would be bad for the chasm there to widen any further. Maybe he’s so sensitive *because* he subsists purely on vibe and mood.

“Hmm, I think I’ll be spending New Year’s with my family, though…” Ebina smoothly avoided Tobe’s efforts yet again.

His shoulders slumped.

But then she put her finger to her cheek and considered with a *hmm*. “But even if it’s not on the day of…it’d be nice for all of us to hang out,” she continued, emphasizing the *all of us* part.

Miura’s face jerked up. “Oh, that doesn’t sound half-bad.”

“Uh-huh, yeah!” Yuigahama agreed, and Yamato and Ooka nodded in response.

Tobe looked around at all their faces, (“Right, right?”) and Hayama broke into a broad smile at his efforts.

“…Yeah.”

“S-see?!” exclaimed Tobe. “Okay-okay-okay, so like, when? Oh, Hayato, when are you free? I’m always free, BT-dubs.”

“We have soccer practice…” Hayama sighed with exasperation.

Miura nonchalantly interjected. “So when should we hang out, then? …It doesn’t matter to me.” She talked like she was disinterested, but there was something restless about the way she held her hand up under the fluorescent lights, examining her artificial nails. Confirming their perfection, she chuckled to herself.

Ebina’s eyes were kind as she watched Miura.

Finally, their conversation was as warm as it was before. It brought a relieved breath out of Yuigahama. “Oh, sorry, I’ll be right back.” She gave notice to her friends before she left them.

Oh, so is she going to pick flowers? I wonder what this euphemism would be for boys? Maybe it’d be cool to say he’s going to go shoot deer for a bit.

Or so I was thinking, but it seemed it was nothing of that sort. Yuigahama went to her locker at the back and rummaged around for something. Then, rather than going back to her friends, for some

reason, she came over to me.

"Hikki." Hearing my name, I turned to look up at Yuigahama. She fidgeted a little, twisting around awkwardly. She seemed to be having a hard time telling me whatever she was trying to say as she opened her mouth. "You've been staring too much…"

"Huh? Uh, I haven't really been looking, though…," I replied falteringly. It was true I'd been staring right at them, but it was awkward to hear it directly from her.

Sensing an incoming excuse, Yuigahama waved her hands aggressively and cut me off in exasperation. "No, no, you were definitely watching. When I glanced over, you were staring so hard, I was honestly like, whoa."

What does she mean, like, whoa*? That sounds mean.* "Hey. Then you stop staring, too."

"What?! No, but it was, like, y-you know? I could just feel it! Like a pressure, or chills…"

Those two things are pretty different, though; are you okay with that…?

After she frantically offered an excuse of her own, anxiously flailing her hands around, she added, "Wait, why've you been watching us, Hikki? Did you need something?"

Though her question seemed innocuous, it bothered me more than I expected. Why had I been watching them? "…Uh, not really…… Well, you guys tend to be the center of attention, so it just happens."

"Hmph…"

I wasn't sure from Yuigahama's response if that convinced her or not. But I wasn't really lying. Hayama's clique did draw attention. And conspicuous things will naturally be seen. So it wasn't strange for them to catch my eye.

But I was sure that wasn't the only reason I'd been looking.

How do you smooth over something that's come peeling off? I had the feeling Hayama's clique would teach me.

Perhaps the deepest level of human observation is not passively watching others but actively observing them, rendering yourself in their position and reflecting on yourself.

I think I'd been watching them because I knew they had relationships I thought of as phony pageantry, and I'd been projecting my current situation onto it.

Maybe Tobe had been acting unconsciously on his sense of the

disturbance among his clique, but I think Ebina was consciously trying to close the rift between them.

It seemed to me that Miura, Hayama, Tobe, and Ebina were all, bit by bit, comparing and adjusting the small ways they'd become estranged and their minor feelings of unease, searching for the points they might compromise on so they would all be satisfied, making their own sorts of modifications in the way things ought to be.

That's one way to do it.

Even they can be doubtful about the way they communicate, fumbling around in the dark.

Between them and us, who are the real phonies?

"Hikki?" As I started getting lost in my thoughts, Yuigahama's voice pulled me back. When I raised my head, I saw her examining me with some worry. I hadn't even noticed her face draw close, and her dewy eyes and warm breath felt terribly sharp and real.

I jerked away, falling into the back of my chair. I had to avoid showing anything that would make her feel uneasy. The Service Club's current state was clearly upsetting her, and I was the cause. I owed it to her to conduct myself properly at the very least.

I abandoned those thoughts for the moment; that was an issue to consider when I was alone. Fortunately, I'm drowning in time for that. Times like these, it really is convenient that I'm a loner.

I decided to quickly change the topic. "Anyway, if you don't want people looking, then talk a little quieter. I mean, I think about forty percent of the looks you guys get are people glaring at you for being loud."

"Urk, maybe… But with Tobecchi around, that's not gonna happen."

That's a mean thing to say. It's true Tobe is loud and obnoxious, but he has positive traits, too—like how the roots of his hair seem healthy.

No, but even when someone isn't loud, your eyes will just travel over there sometimes. For example, at that moment, even as I was talking to Yuigahama, my eyes were moving on their own.

It's just— Look, when there's something moving in your field of vision, it just gets your attention, you know? And that goes all the more when it's someone cute.

Maybe that was why the moment the door at the front of the classroom opened, my eyes were pulled over there.

Saika Totsuka walked in, wearing his gym uniform with the

long sleeves and long pants. He sighed in relief when he stepped through the door; I bet the hallway was quite chilly. I automatically inhaled with a moan, too. *Ohh, the air Totsuka breathed out is coming into me…* Yeah, that's really creepy, if I do say so myself.

Noticing me and Yuigahama, Totsuka trotted up to us. "Morning." His charming greeting came with a smile like a flower unfurling its petals. Greetings really are important… I think it's very sad to greet people for reasons like preventing crime and stuff, uh-huh.

"Morning, Sai-chan."

"Yeah, morning."

When Yuigahama and I returned the greeting, Totsuka blinky-blinked his cute little eyes. *He's so cute… Oh, wait, no. Why is he a little cutely surprised? I should have been the one surprised, there—by his cuteness.*

"Totsuka, is something up?" I asked, as if to say, *Did I say something funny?*

Noticing that, Totsuka waved a little hand in front of his chest in an attempt to smooth it over. "I just kind of thought it was unusual to see the two of you, like, together in the classroom."

"O-oh?" Yuigahama replied, sounding a little startled.

Anxious about her reaction, Totsuka added in a bit of a rush, "Oh, I simply never had that impression of you before."

Now that he said it, I realized it was true. Yuigahama didn't talk to me in the classroom very often.

And that made me realize that when she'd gone to her locker, she hadn't taken anything out of it, had she? If she'd suddenly come over to talk to me, people would have thought something was up, so she'd probably taken her little detour to avoid that. Yuigahama's always been thoughtful like that, I guess…

But despite the care she'd taken, if someone with an eye for it were to see, they'd notice it was unnatural.

"…Did something happen?" Totsuka asked, shifting his gaze from me to Yuigahama with concern.

"Oh, nothing at all! …W-well, we were just talking a bit about the club, I guess," Yuigahama equivocated, sounding flustered.

"Oh, the club, huh?" Totsuka clapped his hands as if that made sense to him. Yes, such guileless trust is indeed a virtue. When you're as pure and innocent as Totsuka, anyone trying to deceive you might well die from the pangs of conscience.

“Well, it’s good if the club is up and running again like before,” Totsuka said with a smile, and I think he honestly didn’t mean anything by it. He’d been involved in whole hullabaloo with the student council election as well. Any outsider looking at me and Yuigahama talking about the club would figure it was proof everything had gone well.

But Yuigahama’s expression was stiff. “Y-yeah…” She was stuck for a moment before immediately smiling to cover it up. “Oh, I know! If you need anything, Sai-chan, you should come visit!”

I nodded in response. “…Yeah.”

I wasn’t sure if I could say it was *like before* or not. There was some proper conversation going on between us and Yukinoshita, and there was no hostility among us. We weren’t ignoring one another, and we weren’t having clashes of opinions, either.

Nothing had happened.

So there was nothing. That was all.

When our exchange resulted in a strange silence, Totsuka tilted his head and gave us a questioning look. I could tell he wanted to ask if something had happened. But I doubted I could explain it well, so I decided to quickly change the direction of the conversation. “Anyway, well, you know, you could actually come by even if you don’t need anything! You’re always welcome!”

“Someone’s more enthusiastic than usual!” Yuigahama’s eyes widened in shock.

Oh, do I seem so unenthusiastic, normally…?

“Ah-ha-ha. Yeah, I will, if I ever need anything.” Totsuka smiled cheerfully and then glanced over at the clock. It was nearly time for the homeroom teacher to walk in. “Looks like homeroom is about to start,” he said.

“Yeah, looks like. So…” Yuigahama left my desk with Totsuka. Just before she went to her seat, she spun around and leaned close to my ear. “…Oh yeah, Hikki.”

A floral scent wafted around her, and her breath was soft on my ear. Her unexpected approach made me remember the warmth in the cold clubroom that time after school at dusk, when I’d felt as if something was ending.

My heart suddenly jumped.

Her tone cautious, she whispered, “…Let’s go to club together.”

Without waiting for my reply, Yuigahama rushed off to her own seat. As I watched her go, I didn’t even realize I was pressing my

chest.

My heart was no longer jumping. In fact, it felt like it had jumped inward instead and was trying to strangle me.

Yuigahama must have chosen to say that because she was finding it difficult to go to the clubroom.

I felt the same way. I couldn't bring myself to want to go there.

Going there every day without fail nevertheless was masochistic, somehow. I'm sure none of us wanted to go.

But we went anyway because we didn't want to acknowledge this feeling. We couldn't acknowledge the scale of what had been lost.

Or were we just going through the motions purely out of a sense of duty, out of sheer obligation, believing this should be maintained, that it should be preserved like some kind of endangered species—or perhaps we just wanted to preserve ourselves.

Lately, our time had been spent trying not to run away—nothing more.

As if we were mourning a dead person.

We didn't want to make what had been lost into an excuse. We didn't want to avoid giving in to the unfairness of it, to avoid acknowledging it. This was why we pushed ourselves above and beyond, acting as if it were no different from usual.

I knew it was fake.

But I was the one who had made that choice.

I wasn't allowed to make a new choice. Time is always irreversible, and often enough, it's impossible to undo what's been done. Mourning that would be a betrayal of myself in the past.

Regret is the proof that what you had was worth something. That's why I don't mourn. I'd attained something that was fundamentally impossible to obtain. That fact alone should satisfy me.

Once you get used to luck and fortune, they're just mundane. I think unhappiness is what you feel when that ends.

So if I took it for granted that I would get nothing in the future, too, that alone would benefit my life.

I don't want to deny who I once was, at least.

I think that's how my days will be spent, from now on.

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As usual, I couldn't concentrate in class, and then it was over. As afterschool activities began, I got ready to leave the classroom right away. As I was opening the door to the hallway, I glanced over at Yuigahama. She was still chatting with Miura and Ebina.

Well, since she'd asked me to go with her, I figured I should wait. But still, there was no need to bother waiting in a way others would notice.

Leaving the classroom, I walked a few steps before leaning against the wall.

In less than a minute, Yuigahama leaped out of the classroom, looking panicked. She anxiously looked all around and found me immediately, then marched over in an angry huff. "Why'd you leave without me?!"

"I didn't. I'm here, waiting."

"Yeah, but…! Huh? Then I guess it's okay." She convinced herself, then took a breath, and as if injecting a burst of cheer into herself, she heaved her backpack higher on her shoulder. "…Then let's go."

"Uh-huh."

In the hallway, our eyes met, and then we started walking for the special-use building.

It struck me that this exchange of looks was exactly like those of accomplices in crime.

I endeavored to walk more slower than usual. At my usual pace, I'm sure I'd leave her behind.

Unlike the classroom where we'd been before, this hallway was chilly.

No one passed by, and the only sound was our footsteps as we walked in silence. Yuigahama had been so talkative in the classroom, but now she was quiet. Almost purposefully so.

But as we approached the clubroom, she must not have been able to stand the silence anymore. She opened her mouth. "Hey…"

"Hmm?" I asked back.

But she weakly shook her head. "…Nothing."

"Oh," I replied, and silence fell once more. Once we turned the next corner, we'd be in the clubroom. I hadn't been in the clubroom for a whole day, but what about her? I'd thought she'd been eating

lunch with Yukinoshita in the clubroom, before. Suddenly curious, I asked, “So anyway, what have you been doing for lunch?”

After a bit of consideration, she smiled and awkwardly said, “Huh? Hmm, same as before.”

“…Oh.”

That was enough to convince me. I’m sure all their discussion was rambling and incoherent. Yuigahama would say something to Yukinoshita, and she’d respond, and they’d continue back and forth in that manner the whole time.

If you think about it, that was the same as before, but in form only. It would explain why Yuigahama had struggled to reply.

We spent the same time in the same place with the same people, but it still just didn’t feel the same.

I’d been searching for the mistake that had stayed with us all this time, since that day. And still unable to find that answer, my hand touched the door.

It was already unlocked.

I’d actually left the classroom the moment homeroom had ended, but it seemed the master of this clubroom had arrived here before us.

Opening the door, I stepped in and gazed around; the clubroom was unpleasantly empty. Had this clubroom always been so devoid of anything? The desks and chairs and the tea set that was no longer being used were there, unchanged.

And Yukino Yukinoshita was there, same as always.

“Hello.”

“Yahallo! Yukinon!” Yuigahama cheerfully greeted her in return, then sat down in her usual seat. I responded with a casual bow as well and took my own seat. The chairs that never moved were like nails pinning us to this place.

Yukinoshita was also sitting in her chair as she resumed her reading in her proper posture as usual. Yuigahama pulled out her cell phone, while I took a paperback out from my bag.

These actions had been ritualized, like the steps of a ceremony. Maybe we were thinking if we did the same things as before, we could re-create the past. But that was impossible, no matter how we tried to fulfill the activation conditions. We were just skimming the surface; eventually, it would all wear down.

The sigh didn’t leave me.

“That reminds me—so today, Sai-chan was like…” Yuigahama’s

mouth popped open. She spoke like a young child earnestly telling her mother about what had happened that day. But that wasn't it, either. She was firing off words one after another in an attempt to do something about the languishing atmosphere.

It was like a carbon copy of how she used to be, always adapting herself to the social situation, unable to say the things she really wanted to say.

I was aware of this, but I joined in on the discussion she'd started anyway.

Over and over, we had these little conversations. How long would this go on? How long would we be able to continue like this? If we no longer could, then what would happen?

I was sure we'd wind up spending that day the same as the day before.

And most likely the day after that, and after that.

In this closed world was not peace but obstacles and stagnation. Any remaining paths would merely decay and rot away.

Yuigahama must have exhausted the topics she'd come up with, because the conversation stopped. The silence spread, deafening.

That was when, as if tearing through the silence and the obstacles in our way, there was a knock on the door.

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The knock came again.

It was the first visitor in a while, making us look at one another automatically. I don't know what the two of them thought about this visit. Yuigahama jerked up and looked toward the door, while Yukinoshita's expression did not change. As for me, I started biting my lip without realizing it.

"Come in," Yukinoshita called out with a glance at the door. When the answer finally came, the door opened.

"Hiii therrre…" A girl came in, golden hair swaying as she covered her face with the overlong sleeves of her cardigan.

It was Soubu High School's student council president, Iroha Isshiki. Even now that she was president, she was still wearing her uniform somewhat casually.

Yuigahama seemed surprised to see Isshiki show up, while

Yukinoshita quietly knit her eyebrows. I probably looked exasperated. *What's she here for, first thing after her election? It doesn't look like she's come to hang out, though…*

Isshiki took no notice of our misgivings, calling out in a cutely needy voice you could describe as almost woeful as she approached me. Then she started whining like she was on the verge of tears in a deliberate-looking way. "Guuuys, I'm in *major* trouble…"

Still manipulative as ever… It kind of stirs up these protective desires, so could you please stop…? It makes me want to help you out! If this were anyone other than Isshiki, I'd have offered a hand immediately.

"What's wrong, Iroha-chan? Take a seat."

"Oh, Yui. Thank you very much." When Yuigahama offered her a chair, the urge to cry must have vanished. She seemed awfully nonchalant about plopping down.

After she was seated, Yukinoshita spoke up. “First, let’s hear what you have to say.” Her tone was no different from usual and indicated no particular attitude toward our guest. Her response made me a little relieved. And at the same time, my relief felt wrong.

Why did that make me feel better?

Before I could discover the true nature of that discomfort, Isshiki opened her mouth. “So, well…actually, last week, the student council began their first job.”

“Oh, so they’ve already gotten started. That’s fast,” Yuigahama commented conversationally.

“You’re telling me,” Isshiki replied, and then she continued. “And we’re in reeeal trouble with something.” The moment those words were out of her mouth, her level of excitement sank like a stone. She was recalling what that job entailed. Was it that bad…?

Though I was privately anxious, I decided to ask about it. “How are you in trouble?”

Isshiki’s head jerked up. “It’s almost Christmas, right?”

“Yeah, that’s right… Huh? Uh, that’s a real sudden topic change.” That startled me… The topic had suddenly Boson-jumped. Well, it was true that Christmas was nearly here.

In response, Isshiki puffed out her cheeks and pouted in a deliberate sort of way. “I wasn’t changing the subject. Just listen to me, pleeease!”

“Yeah, Hikki.” For some reason, Yuigahama was pouting, too, and she came in to defend Isshiki.

Wait, I’m in the wrong, here? The way girls talk is too unique. I’m not gonna get that.

I prompted her to go on with a sour look that said, *Fine, whatever, continue*, and Isshiki did just that.

“And since it’s Christmas, we’ve been talking about joining up with a nearby high school to do a local Christmas event, like something for the elderly or little kids or something, but…”

“Huh, so which school are you working with?”

“It’s called Kaihin High School.”

Ohhh, that one, huh…? It’s a fairly decent prep school, not too far from ours. It’s a comparatively new one that was established a while back when three schools were consolidated into one. Since

it's three schools combined, it's big, with lavish facilities and a nice building. They have fancy-schmancy conveniences like elevators, and apparently, they take attendance with ID cards. How trendy. The school has this modern approach, too, like they have a credit system for classes or something instead of sticking with your same class through high school, though I don't really know how it works. I think it's a pretty popular school.

But I got the feeling our two schools didn't really interact much. This joint event seemed pretty forced.

"…Who suggested that idea?" I asked.

I'm not sure what was so funny to Isshiki about that, but she giggled a little at my apparently endearing silliness, then replied in a low whisper like it was a secret for only me to know. "They did. Of course I'd *never* suggest that!"

"Of course…"

She really does seem like she'd treat the job with contempt. When you have a type like that in the workplace, it's a burden on everyone else. They do say the faults of others are a good teacher. So as not to be a burden to others, I should absolutely not get a job.

But anyway, I'm impressed she could accept the proposal when that's her stance…, I was thinking as I eyed her in exasperation.

Remembering must have made her angry, as she forgot to put on her I'm-so-cute act and continued quite huffily, "Obviously, you'd normally say no to something like that, right? I've got Christmas plans of my own, after all."

"Saying no is obvious to you, huh…?"

"That's way too personal a reason…"

Yuigahama and I were both stunned.

I don't know whether to call that mental fortitude or fearlessness or what… You've got the second-most rotten personality after me, don't you? This is starting to inspire a genuine sense of affinity in me, and worst case I could get a crush on you, so please don't.

But it seemed she wasn't actually fearless, and Isshiki's shoulders slumped as she muttered, "But Miss Hiratsuka said to do it, so…"

Oh, so she's involved in this, too. No surprise there, huh? Or wait—if she's similar to me even in her weakness to Miss Hiratsuka, then that gives us even more in common— Tl;dr you get it.

"So we've gotten started, but then, it's like… Hmm, I guess…it isn't really coming together?" Isshiki said. I think she was pretty

seriously disheartened this time; there was no humor in her tone. She wasn't a particularly hard worker, and she didn't think much of what student council did, but it seemed she was still concerned in her own way. Maybe I should give her credit for caring enough that she would come talk to us instead of abandoning it. Plus, it wasn't as if she'd become president of her own will. She'd basically been semi-tricked into it by me. And because of that guilt, I found myself going easy on her.

"Well, that's what happens if you're working with another school. Don't worry about it."

"Yeah, right?" Isshiki said. She tilted her head and looked at me through her lashes as she added another "Riiight?"

That's super-manipulative, and it's not even cute… This part is what makes her different from Komachi.

Anyway, I'll summarize her rambling explanation.

The first job of the new student council was a Christmas event with the goal of contribution to the community. Soubu wouldn't be going at it solo but rather working in cooperation with Kaihin High School.

This was more challenging than what the student council usually managed. She not only had to coordinate with another school but also to do it before the internal relations within student council, as well as her own position, had truly solidified. It was a bit of a heavy burden for a rookie.

Judging from the timing, this plan may have been decided before Isshiki had been elected. In other words, it was the legacy of the previous generation.

That does happen sometimes. Whoever handled things before will casually leave behind their old mess. That happened at my old part-time job. You're just doing your job as usual, and then it suddenly shows up like a land mine and you just gotta deal with it, even when you have no clue what you're doing. And what's more, when I questioned my predecessor about it, they told me it was so long ago, they didn't remember. So what would you have me do? Thanks to this incident, when I quit, my successor took it over without me ever having touched it. In order to break such tragic chains of disadvantage, I will absolutely never get a job.

Well, never mind about me.

The issue here was Isshiki and her predecessor.

"Wait, before you come to us, you should ask Shiromeguri

about it.”

Meguri Shiromeguri, aka Megumegurin ♪, the holder of Megurin☆Power, was the student council president before Isshiki. She’s sweet and cute. What’s with this half-assed explanation?

Since the handover of the student council president role would still be ongoing, normally, it was standard procedure to talk to her first. So…why *was* Isshiki here instead of Meguri? Did she get a special letter? I never wanted her on the character roster, though…

After I said that, Isshiki’s gaze drifted away. “Yeah, that’s true… but I can’t burden someone studying for entrance exams, can I?”

Meguri had been guaranteed a recommendation to her school of choice, though, so I doubted she was that busy. Maybe Isshiki didn’t like her that much? Well, to someone like Isshiki who put on an airheaded fluffy-sweet act, a real fluffy-sweet airhead like Megurin might hurt to look at. The real thing is always overwhelming and unreachable, after all. I could understand wanting to avert your eyes.

“You guys are the only ones I can ask!”

When Isshiki finished her explanation, Yuigahama and I both breathed short sighs. I guess this is what you call being speechless with exasperation.

Following our silence, a quiet moment passed.

But we were not the only reason for that quiet.

This silence was because Yukinoshita was not following her usual routine of inquiring into the circumstances of the visitor. Instead, she remained taciturn.

Noticing that, I looked at her.

Her long eyelashes gently lowered, eyes like the still surface of a lake, she looked at Isshiki—no, she looked at us.

Instantly, I realized what felt so off.

I’d felt relief when Isshiki had walked into the clubroom, and then I had been uneasy about that relief—and that was because nothing had happened when Isshiki and Yukinoshita had seen each other.

If Yukinoshita had sincerely wanted to be student council president, then…

The ones to prevent that had been Isshiki and, most of all, me.

Perhaps it was cruel for Isshiki to come asking about this.

If we were to take on this request, we’d wind up functionally working as agents for the student council.

I still didn't know what Yukinoshita really thought of this situation, but I figured perhaps it would be cruel to place student council affairs right in front of her face. Showing her what she wanted but couldn't have had to be the cruelest thing of all.

Was it right to accept Isshiki's request?

As I was hesitating, Isshiki must have felt doubtful about the pause, as her gaze drifted around anxiously. "What should I do?"

Isshiki seemed fully ready to rely on us for this, but I was concerned about what Yukinoshita would say. I waited for her to react, but she didn't reply at all.

Yukinoshita must have sensed Yuigahama and me looking at her. She brought her hand to her chin in a thoughtful gesture. "I see… I basically understand the situation, but…" Despite the long pause she had taken before opening her mouth, she did not come to a conclusion immediately and spoke somewhat vaguely.

Then she glanced over at me and Yuigahama. "What do you think?"

This had to be the first time she'd ever asked us whether we would take a request or not. Until now, she'd always made that judgment herself.

If I were to interpret this change in a positive way, I'd call it an accommodation. But I got the feeling it was not.

As for Yuigahama, her answer was clear as soon as she heard the question. "Why not? Let's do it!"

Yukinoshita examined her, asking with her eyes alone for her reason why.

"It's been a long time since we last got a request. We haven't had anything like this lately. We haven't had much to do, I guess…" Under Yukinoshita's calm stare, Yuigahama wilted and trailed off. "So…I think it'd be nice if we could work on something…like before…"

Like before—the words stuck with me.

I think Yuigahama was hoping this would jump-start us again. She was thinking maybe we could dispel this atmosphere as we dealt with a consultation or request, like we had before.

"I see. Then I think that would be fine."

But Yukinoshita's clear voice denied that possibility.

Her faint smile and her question to us was not an accommodation.

It was capitulation. It was founded in her resignation—giving

in, yielding the judgment and conclusion to someone else.

"…Eh, wouldn't it be better to not?"

The remark left my mouth on its own.

I doubted we could do anything with the Service Club in its current state. And besides, I couldn't stand shoving student council business in Yukinoshita's face. I didn't know what she really thought, but what I was imagining was probably not too far off the mark.

I couldn't let this place deteriorate any more than it already had. We couldn't take that risk.

If I'd acted out of a desire to protect this, then I had to commit to that to the end. Though I had no idea when that end would be, or where the goal was.

Yukinoshita offered no response to my opinion, merely staring at me, but Yuigahama asked me for my rationale. "Huh? Why not?"

"This is a student council problem. Besides, it's not good for Isshiki to be relying on others from the get-go."

"Yeah, maybe you're right, but…" My excuse made Yuigahama smush her bun and fiddle with it in thought for a bit. And though I call it an excuse, it was a fair argument. It should have been enough to make her back down.

But there was one person in the room who was not persuaded.

"Huh? What're you talking about?" Isshiki grumbled at me.

Well, I'd anticipated that. "This club doesn't do everything for you. We're ultimately here only to lend a hand. We're not subcontractors to accept what you dump in our lap. Subcontracting seems like a real tough job, too. Don't you know about subcontracting law? Not that I do. Anyway, this is yours to handle, Isshiki. You got that?" Shooting my zealous argument back at her, I prompted Isshiki to get up as I stood myself. And I pushed her out of the clubroom—er, escorted her out.

Though she reluctantly acquiesced to my zone press, Isshiki didn't forget to complain. "I became president 'cause you said I should? So I'd appreeeciate it if you did something for me!"

Hearing that did weaken my resistance.

It was obvious that I should take responsibility toward Iroha Isshiki, since it was by my actions that she had become student council president. That also meant there was one other person besides Isshiki I had to take responsibility for, too.

So it was clear now what action I should take.

As I chased Isshiki out of the clubroom, I left with her.

Closing the door behind me, I took a few steps away from the room before I turned back to Isshiki, who was still complaining incessantly, and sighed a little. "…I said we wouldn't, back there, but…can we figure out a way for me to help you?"

"Huh?" Isshiki tilted her head, apparently very confused by what I was saying. Well, I had just refused her so emphatically. It was no surprise she'd react like this.

And so I slowly laid it out for her. "Not as the club. Me helping personally. So Yukinoshita and Yuigahama won't be in on it. I think it could be possible, if we do it that way."

Listening to my explanation, Isshiki narrowed her eyes and seemed to be pondering, but she quickly gave the okay nod. "… Well, I'd be fine with that, too. And, like, you alone would actually be easier to han— I mean, I think I could relax and rely on you?"

Uh, you didn't have to correct that.

"So then you're okay with that?" I confirmed one final time, and Isshiki replied with enthusiasm.

"Yep!"

For now, I'd do what I could on my own. It was exceedingly doubtful exactly how much help that would be, but, well, I could back up Isshiki, at least.

At a glance, Isshiki looked like a bit of an idiot, but it's not as if her brain is empty. I think if she did a proper job without trying to rely on us, she could become fairly presidential…

Oh yeah. Thinking back to *rely on*… I remembered when I'd convinced Isshiki to be the student council president, I'd imparted to her a secret tactic. But she had yet to activate it on this occasion. Before we began the task at hand, I should ask her about that.

"But wait, what about Hayama? Hayama, c'mon. Isn't this the kind of thing you go to him for help with, so you can get closer to him?" I asked.

Isshiki's cheeks reddened slightly, and she averted her eyes. "… This is something that's actually hard, so it'd be too much to bother him with."

So it's fine to bother me, huh…? Well, I suppose it is.

But man, it was almost admirable, trying to bother him—Isshiki was doing the proper lovestruck girl thing, in her own way. I was impressed.

But the instant after I was struck by that thought, Isshiki

snickered and put on a devilish grin. “Besiiides, with stuff like this, it’s cute when a girl can’t manage simple things, right? And isn’t it cuuute when she messes up? If she’s asking for help with something that’s actually a huge pain, it’d seem like too much.”

“Oh, is that right…?”

Wow, she reeeeally is a great character, huh…? Give it back! Give me back that impressed feeling! Never mind devilish, she’s a straight-up devil. A demon! A devil! An editor!

That Devilish Girl Iroha completely ignored my freak-out and briskly began talking about what came next. “So let’s meet up in front of the school gates later. I’ll be heading out soon.”

“Huh? We’re starting today…?” I said.

Isshiki wilted apologetically. “Sorry, there’s not much time…”

There’s not much time meant that the plan had moved along somewhat, and she must have tried managing things by herself at first. Although she ultimately had made the decision to rely on us, she had indeed made the effort to handle things herself. I couldn’t blame her for that.

“…No, it’s fine. But let’s meet up somewhere else. It’d be embarrassing if we left the school together and any friends started gossiping about it…”

“What?” Isshiki’s face was serious. Hmm, maybe she didn’t get it because we were from different generations. She was actually staring at me seriously without saying any comebacks, like *I thought you didn’t have any friends*. Then she sighed in exasperation. “Well, fine… Do you know the community center by the train station? We’re meeting there.”

“Oh, there?” I’d gone right past there many times on my way to the station. I recalled there was a senior care facility and a preschool or something nearby. *I get it; so then “contributing to the community” means it’d be for those old people and kids.* The venue for the day of the event would probably be there, too.

I assumed I’d pick up the other details along the way, so first, we’d leave the school.

“All right,” I said, “I’ll go once I’ve got my stuff together.”

“Okay. Right, right! I’ll see you there.” Isshiki smiled and gave me a little bow.

Like I said, manipulative!

X X X

After watching Isshiki turn the corner of the hallway, I went back to the clubroom. Right, so then I had to get ready to go before the time we would meet up.

When I opened the door of the clubroom, Yuigahama and Yukinoshita looked over at me.

“What did Iroha-chan say?” Yuigahama asked, and I gave the reply I had already come up with.

“She whined a whole bunch, but I think I persuaded her.”

“Oh…” Yuigahama’s shoulders drooped despondently as if she was somehow let down. And then she continued quietly and with some trepidation at Yukinoshita’s potential reaction. “I kinda… thought it’d be nice to do something, since it’s been a while…”

“Well, something’ll come eventually.” *When that time comes, I wonder what sort of answer I’ll give them.* I didn’t know what that would be, so I merely said whatever came to my lips.

An ever-so-tiny smile slipped into Yukinoshita’s expression. “Perhaps…it would be better if there were no requests. For things to go on without event.” Quietly, her gaze darted to the window. Her eyes were reflecting the dim red sky, I’m sure.

“…Maybe.” It was the most I could do to reply to Yukinoshita’s vanishing voice. That was why I immediately made my next remark before it could drag out. “Doesn’t look like anyone else’ll come today.”

“It seems that way…,” Yukinoshita replied and closed her book. It seemed she had taken that as the sign to go.

Once I saw that, I grabbed my bag, too. “Then I’m heading out now.”

“Oh, then I guess we’ll call it for today,” Yuigahama said as she rummaged around and started getting ready to go. Turning my back to her, I left the clubroom a bit before them.

I realized something, long ago. It’s not necessarily right to get involved every single time something comes to us. Sometimes you think it’s for the best, but then you get the worst outcome. A lot of the time, you won’t be able to take it back or do it over.

So then, what have I…?

What have we been doing all this time?

2

The meeting smoothly jumps into motion but gets nowhere.

The community center where I was meeting with Isshiki was fairly close to our school, and I got there in only a few minutes by bike.

I'd never actually gone inside the community center before, but I'd seen it many times just passing by, so I didn't have trouble finding it.

It was right by the station, on the same street as a large mall, the Marinpia (nickname: Maripin), and a lot of neighborhood housewives were there in the evening. There were also kids mixed in here and there among them. The Maripin in the area made it the perfect place for high school kids to stop by and hang out after school—I myself would occasionally stop by the bookstore, arcade, or batting center.

Upon arriving at the community center, I parked my bike in the bicycle lot.

I looked around the area a bit, but I didn't see Isshiki. Well, it wasn't like we had specified a clear time to meet.

If I'd known it'd be like this, maybe it'd have been better to come together…

But in order to avoid Yukinoshita and Yuigahama suspecting I was helping Isshiki on my own, we had to meet away from the school. Right now, it would be cruel to take a student council–related request in front of Yukinoshita. But still, it would be irresponsible for me to not help Isshiki at all. There was also the option of excluding Yukinoshita only, but that would seem like a cruel betrayal, too. Considering the way things were with the Service Club at the moment, the optimal decision would be for me to operate individually in this matter.

Mentally summarizing the conclusions I'd come to once again, I sat down at the entrance of the community center by the stairs.

As I stared off into space, Isshiki came out of the convenience store on the other side of the street. She was carrying a heavy-looking bag in one hand. Noticing me, she trotted over.

"Sorry to make you wait! I was just doing a little shopping…" The convenience store bag must have been heavy, as she exhaled a little tired breath.

"…No, it's fine," I replied as I reached a hand out to her.

For some reason, she avoided my hand, staring at me. She tilted her head, as if she didn't get my meaning. "What?"

"Why're you glaring at me? Weren't you playing up how heavy your stuff was 'cause you wanted me to carry it?" I asked.

Isshiki stroked her hair and looked away. Out of surprise or confusion, her face was pink. "Agh… Oh no, it really was just heavy…"

Oh, is that right? I got the impression she'd see most guys as heavy lifters and nothing more, so I'd read too deep and assumed that was the message. You know, since Tobe had been running errands for her automatically.

Isshiki was frozen for a while, but then a thought seemed to hit her, and she suddenly stiffened and took a step away from me. "Ah! Ah! Wait, wereyoujusttryingtoputthemovesonmeI'msorryitalmostgottomeforasecond,b

"Oh, uh-huh…"

How many times does she have to reject me…? Denying it is just a pain in the ass, at this point…

But if her heart will start pattering over something that meaningless, she'd better watch out, or she'll be a whole bundle of nerves when she's traveling. Is your heart gonna pound every time the flight attendant lifts your luggage? It won't, right? …Ah, mine would (revised for flight attendants). Wait, hold on. Even if it's not an FA, if it's a blue-collar sort of lady, I'd feel some butterflies… A woman who supports herself really is great! (Revised for aspiring househusbands.)

"Well, whatever." Completely ignoring everything she said and did, I yoinked the bag from her hands.

"Ah… Thank you…" Isshiki squeezed the sleeves of her cardigan and offered a vigorous bow. It meant I couldn't see her face, but her surprisingly honest thanks embarrassed me.

"…It's nothing. Just a part of the job."

If you have to say thanks for every little thing, it winds up turning into like what Komachi always says: *Thank you! I love you, Big Bro!* I'd meant to indirectly tell her not to worry about it, but I instantly wound up regretting my statement.

"Wow! You're so reliable! Then I'll ask you to handle it next time, too. ♪" She squeezed her hands in front of her chest with a beamingly bright smile.

Ahhh, suddenly this bag feels heavier… What's in here anyway?

The unexpected weight of the bag made me peek inside to see various snacks and juice. Well, I guess it was what you'd call tea snacks, or catering, the sort of thing that's typical for these types of meetings.

Whenever you don't know what to say, you eat these snacks and drink tea to fill the silence. It's like how when you burst out with an insincere-sounding *Ha-ha!* in conversation, then you suddenly pop a mint. Whenever someone does that, you realize, *Oh, this person feels awkward talking to me…*

By the way, if they ask, *Do you want a mint?* even when you're not talking, that's an indirect way of saying *Your breath stinks!* So be careful! You might actually be sick! Wait, that's what you're supposed to be careful about?

But anyway, picking out snacks of this nature is difficult. Anything that makes too much noise or smells too strong will just be a bother. Curious as to what sort of things Isshiki had bought, I took a little peek in the bag.

Hmm. Mild-flavored chocolates, fruit-flavored hard candies, and soft crackers… Yeah, these aren't bad choices. I'd give her points for the fact that all of them were individually wrapped. Then there's no need to set out plates and whatnot, and you won't get your hands dirty. It's not a hassle to take them home after, either.

"Huh, you're being surprisingly considerate," I said, a little appreciative, and Isshiki puffed up with a pout as if that was quite unfair for me to say.

"What do you mean, *surprisingly*? I'm a pretty considerate person, you know! Well, the other school will be bringing some stuff, too."

"Oh. Then isn't this unnecessary? Since this is in their budget anyway. You should just eat all their snacks."

"We can't do that…," Isshiki replied, stiff-faced.

Huh, she really is thoughtful about certain things. She had to mean we couldn't come empty-handed every time when the other school was bringing things.

If they were entertaining us and we were totally guests, that sort of consideration would actually be unnecessary, but we were going to be jointly hosting this event, and since we would be equal participants in this, it would probably be best to maintain that equality, even concerning something as minor as snacks.

Dealing with another school is a pretty big hassle. When I thought about how this was bound to affect matters when we actually got to the task at hand, the bag in my hand felt quite a bit heavier.

X X X

Isshiki brought me along through the community center.

I'd never really been there before—what do you do in a place like that? Does it have a doo, doo, doo-da-loo BGM that has a recovery effect on the community? No, that's a PokéCenter…

The interior was kind of like a government office, with a cold and tranquil air flowing through. It felt like one of those places where you couldn't talk too loudly. Maybe that was because there was a library on the first floor.

I followed Isshiki up to the second floor, and there, the look of it changed a little. I could hear people's chattering and the sound of music coming from somewhere.

The stairs continued upward. I ascertained the music was coming from the third floor.

When I looked up the stairs, wondering what they were doing up there, Isshiki's eyes followed mine. "There's a big hall on the third floor. We'll be doing the Christmas event there."

"Oh…"

I could hear faint thumping; maybe there was a dance club in session or something.

Hmm…so it's basically like a type of citizens' public hall. It's like a facility for people of the region to gather and hold various activities. So then how is it different from a normal public hall? Does it just feel bigger?

Being not very familiar with this sort of facility, I was goggling all around while Isshiki walked ahead of me and stopped directly in front of a room.

Over the door, a sign read LECTURE ROOM. It seemed this was where they were holding the meetings.

Isshiki knocked on the door.

"Yes, come in!" A voice came from within, and Isshiki took a breath before she put her hand on the door.

A wave of chatter flowed out from the opened door. It looked like a school classroom inside, with desks and chairs.

"Hiii, guys!" Greeting them all in a cutesy manner, Isshiki went in first. When I followed her, there wasn't any particular sign of the chatter settling down—no one was even looking at me. It seemed they were all caught up in their own conversations and not paying attention to me.

But they did notice Isshiki, and a voice called out above the commotion. Looking over, I saw a boy wearing the Kaihin High School uniform raising his hand. "Iroha, over here, over here."

"Oh, hellooo!" Waving her hand, Isshiki headed for that group. Naturally, I wound up following after her. Unsurprisingly, they were capable of perceiving me when at close range; the guy who had called out to Isshiki gave me a questioning look before he whispered into her ear to ask, "Who's that?"

"Oh, he's my helper!"

That's a pretty sloppy explanation to give with such a broad smile, Isshiki.

But that must have been enough to satisfy him. He offered an appreciative "Ohhh" before turning to me. "I'm Tamanawa. I'm the student council president of Kaihin High School. Good to meet you!"

"…Uh-huh, likewise." Struck by his particularly brisk self-introduction, I was wondering if I should say my own name or not.

But Tamanawa wasn't at all bothered by things of that nature. "Oh, it's so great to be able to plan together with Soubu High!" he said. "I'm hoping we can cultivate a robust, respect-driven partnership to enable the most synergistic effect possible."

…That's a real punch to throw right at the beginning. Half of it was gibberish to me, so I had no idea what he was saying, but anyway, it seemed Tamanawa was the one who'd arranged for this Christmas event. That much was clear from every word he said.

Since he was Kaihin's student council president, when he started talking, those nearby all shuffled over. He introduced everyone to me as they came, but frankly, I couldn't remember them all. Well, I doubted I'd ever see them again once this event was done, so it wasn't like I had to commit their names and faces to memory.

Just meeting so many people was exhausting, drawing a sigh from me. Leaving it to Isshiki to handle that situation, I took a seat a little ways away and watched her and the others.

Then, my gaze landed on someone among the masses who was staring at me in surprise. She was blinking, apparently shocked to see me here. Then she stood up and came over to me. "…Wait, Hikigaya?"

"…Hey." Hearing this unexpected someone say my name had startled me, too, and it took me a moment to reply. I started sweating in spite of myself.

She wore the uniform of Kaihin High School in a slightly casual manner, while her hands combed through her wavy, artfully messy black hair.

Kaori Orimoto.

She had been in my class in middle school and was also the girl I had confessed my feelings to long ago. I'd had another unexpected encounter with her recently and gotten her involved in an unexpected situation, too. Both the distant and more recent past between us had not made for very pleasant memories.

Now that I think about it, Orimoto goes to Kaihin. If she's here, does that mean she's on their student council…?

It seemed she was wondering the same about me. "Huh?" she said in surprise. "You're a part of Soubu's student council, Hikigaya?"

"Not really…," I replied.

Orimoto nodded as if that made sense to her. "Oh, really? Then you're in the same spot as me. I'm here 'cause a friend invited me." As she spoke, she was peeking behind me and glancing all around. Was she searching for something? "You're alone, Hikigaya?" she asked.

"Yeah, I generally am," I answered, and Orimoto sputtered, then held her stomach as she burst into laughter.

"What the heck? You're such a riot."

"Uh, that wasn't a joke…" *There was nothing to laugh about there,*

was there…? I can't be the butt of the joke when there's no joke… But if there was one, would that make the joke the *seme* and me the *uke*? I'm neither, though!

But thanks to Orimoto, I had learned a bit about this group. Though this was going to be a joint event between the Soubu and Kaihin student councils, it seemed there were some volunteers participating, too.

"It kinda seem like there aren't many kids from your school, doesn't it?" Orimoto asked. "Or is it just that we have lots?"

"I dunno…" This was only my first day, so I didn't know much about the interior workings of things. But when I looked around, I saw more than ten kids from Kaihin. By comparison, on the Soubu side…

Wait, huh? Our student council is… Oh, there they are. They were all clumped in the corner. Aside from Isshiki and me, in our school's uniform there were one, two…four, huh. What's more, compared with the kids from Kaihin, they were kind of shrinking away. It was like they felt inferior.

"True, there aren't many of us…"

"I mean, you can tell just by looking, right? Well, not like it matters," Orimoto said, and then she seemed to lose interest, gliding away from me and back to her seat.

As if switching places with her, Isshiki returned. She gave Orimoto a once-over, then muttered, "Is that someone you know?"

Your tone suggests the idea of my having acquaintances is what's in question here, so please lay off, Irohasu. Also, hey, you've seen her once already, okay? Well, that had been from a distance, so maybe she didn't remember. That meant I wasn't quite sure how to explain the situation, but in the end, I decided to go with the usual explanation.

"Yeah. Well, she was in my class in middle school."

"Huh…" Though Isshiki had been the one to ask, she didn't seem very interested in the answer. She sat down in a nearby chair and started opening the snacks and stuff she'd bought. Once the Kaihin students took notice, they started setting out their own drinks and snacks, too.

It seemed the meeting was going to start soon.

Everyone headed for their designated seats at desks that were arranged in the shape of a blocky U.

Now then, which corner shall I occupy…? Hey, protecting one of the four corners actually makes me feel like one of the four holy beasts, I

was thinking when I felt a little tug on my sleeve.

"Heeey, come over here."

"Oh, I'm fine in the corner, though…," I said, but Isshiki would not let go. I tried tugging back to escape her grip, but it remained firm. *Why's she so strong? She's holding on to it in a cute way, but I totally can't shake her off…*

"Come onnn, come onnn, it's gonna get started."

Then she tugged me again.

"I get it! You're gonna stretch my shirt."

Well, no matter where I sat, I wasn't going to be saying anything during this meeting anyway, so it'd all be the same. So I can at least sit in a spot close to the snacks. Reluctantly, I gave in and sat next to Isshiki.

Though the desks were arranged in a U shape, sitting right at the head, in what you would call the seat of honor, was the student council president of Kaihin High School, Tamanawa. We were in the corner on the right side.

Looking around again, I saw that just as Orimoto had said earlier, there were more people from Kaihin. Numbers-wise, they had about twice as many bodies present, but the difference felt bigger than the number itself. The biggest reason for that had to be the noise level. The Kaihin side was quite lively, with boys and girls mixed together, but the Soubu kids were very markedly quiet.

Well, Kaihin had been the ones to come up with the idea, so it was no wonder they were more enthusiastic about it. They were like the organizer, or the sponsor or whatever. Our seating placement expressed that even further.

Inferring the power balance from this situation, it seemed Kaihin was in charge of various affairs, while our school's position was…more often devoted to support, if I had to put a name to it.

After confirming that everyone had taken their seats, the Kaihin student council president, Tamanawa, clapped his hands. "Right, then—let's begin the meeting! I'm glad to be working with you all today," he said as if he was used to this sort of thing, and everyone bobbed their heads casually in response.

Finally, the meeting had begun.

Tamanawa called out to one of the Kaihin kids and had them go to the whiteboard. Watching the pen squeaking out the characters out of the corner of his eyes, Tamanawa announced, "Let's begin with a thought shower, like the last time."

Huh? What's that cool-sounding thing? That's not in my moveset.

Or so I wondered for a moment, but it was actually nothing, just brainstorming. There are various more minute definitions, but basically, it means for a group to freely present ideas.

"The topic of discussion will be, continuing from last time, cogitating on the content and presentation of concepts for the event…"

As Tamanawa moved things along, the Kaihin students raised their hands here and there, and they began to present the ideas each of them had come up with.

I watched in silence for a little while. I mean, like, jumping in when you don't really understand the situation causes trouble for others! I wasn't cutting corners and slacking. I was being considerate!

Someone from Kaihin said, "Considering the market demands of us high school students, we really must actualize innovation based on youth-minded values…"

Hmm, I see. They have a point.

Yet another person from Kaihin chimed in, "So then, of course, expediting a win-win relationship between us and the community is a prerequisite."

Y-yeah. Well, I get it.

A different Kaihin student added, "This may necessitate strategic thinking on matters of cost performance. And then pursuing collaborative consensus…"

Uh—uh-huh… That's right.

After listening in silence to their meeting thus far, it hit me.

…What the hell is this meeting?

Not only did I have no idea what they were doing, I didn't really get what they were talking about, either. *Am I stupid or something?*

Feeling uneasy, I looked over at Isshiki beside me to see her nodding and making appreciative sounds like "Oooh" and "Ahhh." Did you know, Raiden?

It would have been awkward if I fell too far behind when I'd come to help, so I stealthily checked with Isshiki. "Isshiki, what are they saying right now?" I asked her quietly.

She turned her head slightly toward me. Her head was tilted cutely. "Huh? Uh…" And then she made a vague sort of exhale with a shrug.

What's that supposed to mean? That sounds like the noises Ai-chan makes when she plays table tennis.

She was reacting with all those *ooh*s even when she didn't understand things? I gave her an exasperated look, but she didn't seem bothered. She was smiling casually as if to say, *Don't worry about it!*

"Well, they're proposing lots of stuff."

"Uh-huh…" *I guess if they're saying they'll come up with ideas, then we have to be the one to carry out their plans… Well, I think I could cover that well enough on my own.*

I don't hate simple labor. Repetitive mechanical tasks are acerbating to the spirit, but the acerbating of my spirit has long been thoroughly exacerbated to the point of reprobation. If you don't have to act with care or use your head, that's easy in its own way.

I figured, eh, I'd make sure to be good and listen to precisely what it was we would be doing. But the discussion didn't seem to have much substance…

Tamanawa, who was in charge of proceedings, also appeared to realize that.

"Everyone, I think there may be something more important here…," he declared in a weighty tone, and tension ran through the assembled crowd. As expected of a student council president, he had a certain amount of gravity. Attention gathered on him, everyone wondering what he would say next.

He swept his gaze over the whole lecture room, and then with a slightly exaggerated gesture like spinning a pottery wheel, he began.

"We should think logically, utilizing the rational formation of ideas."

Isn't that saying the same thing? How many times are you going to think?

"We should take the customer's view, fostering a client-side perspective."

Like I said, aren't you saying the same thing? How many times are you going to become the customer?

I think I had a slightly strained smile on my face. But everyone else was in awe, staring at Tamanawa with sparkles in their eyes.

…This is no good. It looks like the president is the same as all the rest of them…

More likely, similar sorts of people had come together here—had been gathered here.

After all that, the meeting continued along the same lines.

"So then we should consider outsourcing…"

"But that methodology would be a nonoptimal strategy."

"I see. So then we should account for possible re-sche, going forward."

What the heck is re-sche*, a restaurant with great beef tongue? Why are these guys all using nothing but technobabble? What is this,* Mahouka*?*

This sort of discussion continued, like, "Game-changing innovation!" "Dialoguing and collaborative negotiation!" "The solution is results-oriented!" This was beyond the sort of added English in modern hip-hop music—I think they might have been some hip-hop hiiighly intelligent individuals.

Whaaa…? They're so intellectual and socially conscious… I feel like all this big brain energy is gonna cause me to lose consciousness, here…

X X X

Where do we come from, and where do we go?

It was the sort of meeting where such thoughts would cross your mind. Just where had this meeting come from, and where was it going?

Before I knew it, the meeting had ended without anything resembling a proper conclusion.

But brainstorming is often like that. It's about trying to get as great a variety of ideas presented as possible. It's done with the sole goal of creating ideas. So then perhaps this meeting had not necessarily been entirely useless.

However, I was bothered a little by the fact that nearly all the ideas had come from the Kaihin side. Though the Soubu students had been there, they'd hardly said anything. Well, after that barrage of highbrow lingo from earlier, it was no wonder those of us from Soubu shrank away. Not even Isshiki, the president, would feel like she could voice her own ideas in an atmosphere like that.

She was currently in an animated conversation with the Kaihin

student council.

There was nothing in particular for me to do, so I kept to myself across the room, zoning out as I watched Isshiki. When she noticed me, she found an appropriate moment to finish her chat and then came over to me.

"Hey, did you get the gist of it?"

"Nope…I didn't understand anything."

Isshiki was probably asking me if I had recognized the point of this meeting or not. Of course I got that much, but unfortunately, with all the business speak flying back and forth, I wasn't sure it would be accurate to say I comprehended what was said.

Isshiki must have picked that up from my expression. She breathed a short sigh. "Yeah, it all sounded kinda difficult, huh?"

Well, it wasn't so much that the words used were difficult, but rather their vagueness rendered the ideas they were conveying incomprehensible. A trivial distinction to Isshiki, I guess, as she put on a charming and cutesy smile.

"But they really like it when I go, *Wooow!* Or *I've got to work hard at this, too!* For the rest, all I have to do is respond to the lingo, and we're good."

"You're gonna get stabbed one day…"

Even if that method worked now, I worried that eventually, she'd face severe retaliation. Seriously, omega males will fall for that so easily; it causes so many tragedies… These types can be weirdly pure, single-minded, wholehearted, and earnest, so they misunderstand easily. Damn, when you really think about it, these types are really great guys! Why don't girls like them?! How bizarre!

As I was pondering this, Isshiki mused out loud, "Hmm…but you're sometimes like that, too. It's sorta like you're overcompensating for something…" She almost laughed. I swear I heard a *lol* added after that comment…

"Don't assume I'm like them. I'm not overcompensating. I'm overly self-conscious."

An overcompensating type is basically someone who wants to emphasize their strong ambition for personal growth. They're mildly cringey kids who try to present themselves as competent and different from other people, and they throw around cool-sounding business and economics terms in a pseudo-intellectual manner. It's not that different from M-2 syndrome.

Meanwhile, the overly self-conscious types are basically mildly cringey kids. It's not that different from M-2 syndrome.

"Aaagh, I don't really get it," Isshiki muttered, exasperated.

Well, neither do I. But regardless, I'm sure both groups are cringey to others around them.

"Anyway, I've worked out what it is we're doing, so let's get on that." Isshiki pulled out a handful of papers.

Oh, so her conversation with them wasn't just chitchat. Was she asking about what roles those of us from Soubu would be filling, since that didn't come up in the meeting?

Meetings are often pointless. I think it's more common for the important things not to be decided in meetings but in private discussions between VIPs. Isshiki's rather shrewd in that regard. And perhaps because she's a cute first-year girl, they've been treating her well, too.

"You're getting along with them pretty well, huh?"

"Hmm. Well, I suppose so." Isshiki put her pointer finger to her chin and tilted her head in thought before letting out a laugh. "… Wait, aren't you the one who taught me that it's cute when a younger girl wants to learn things from you?"

"I didn't teach you anything like that…" I mean, yes, I did suggest the merits of skillfully using that position. But I didn't recall saying anything so specific. *Wait, maybe this is what happens if you interpret something in the Isshiki manner… Oh dear, have I unknowingly created a monster? This sort of thing is bound to tear the soccer club apart…*

"But, well, given the way things are going, can't we let them handle everything? You don't need me," I said.

Isshiki looked at her shoes, struggling to reply to that. "Ahhh, um, I guess so…"

I assumed there had to be something she was worried about, so I waited for her to continue.

But I didn't get to hear that because someone rapped on our desk. "Hey, Iroha-chan. Can I ask you to handle this, too? We went and handled the bigger part, after all."

Tamanawa, the student council president of Kaihin High School, had appeared. It seemed he had an addendum to his recent discussion with Isshiki, as he handed her a few more papers.

"Oh, sure!" She accepted them smoothly. No trace of her earlier gloom could be seen on her face.

“Thanks. If there’s anything you’re confused about, feel free to ask. I’ll be sure to fill you in.” Tamanawa gave a charming smile and waved before leaving. Isshiki returned the gesture as she watched him go.

“Okay, let’s do this.” Turning back to me, she gathered up the extra printouts she’d been given and started passing them out to the other members of the Soubu student council. “So that’s the deal. It looks like our job will be writing up the record of proceedings. Right, then—I’ll be counting on you all to handle that,” she said, allotting work to each member. Their reactions were quite lacking. They seemed far less motivated than the other student council, which was harmonious and happy.

Well, it’d be weirder to be fully enthusiastic about work. Real weird.

But I could understand our student council not hopping to work when their responsibility was merely to carry out what the other school had planned. They probably didn’t want to be treated as an afterthought.

I accepted the records from Isshiki, too. Aside from that, there was also the schedule for future meetings and the task checklist. It seemed our job for now was to brush these up.

We carried out this work in silence.

Then one of the student council members suddenly stood to hand the printouts to Isshiki. “Is this all right, President?”

“Ah, I’ll check over it.” Upon accepting them, Isshiki’s expression stiffened.

The boy facing her opened his mouth, too, as if he wanted to say something. “Oh, about this…”

“Yes…?”

“No, actually, never mind…” The boy, who looked like a student council executive, swallowed the rest of what he was going to say and looked away. “Thanks,” he said quietly, then returned to his seat.

When I followed him with my eyes, thinking, *Haven’t I seen him before?* Isshiki noticed and explained in a whisper, “That’s the vice president.”

I suddenly realized. *Oh, that guy from second year…* I didn’t know his name, but I’d kind of seen him around on the same floor at school. So he was our vice president, huh? Well, even if I knew the president, it wasn’t as if anyone else would be that well-known.

He's in the same year as me, huh? That would explain why Isshiki was speaking politely to him.

Hmm. This is rather complicated.

It's difficult to have an underling who is older than you, and it can also be a little disconcerting to have a superior who's younger than you. When I had that convenience store job, it was really hard to get along with this new employee who was older… When they're learning about the job from you, they act diffident, almost tiptoeing around you.

It seemed even Isshiki, who was used to being cosseted by her elders, knew that struggle.

"Seems like you're having a rough time," I commented.

"Yeah… I don't think he likes me very much. But that's how things are, at first." Isshiki's face clouded for an instant. But then with her usual, somehow provocative smile, she quickly added, "He'll get used to me eventually."

Well, it's true that it's hard to get along perfectly as best friends from the very start. There will be some disputes, disagreements, and differences of opinions.

But there's potential there. If something has just begun, it can change in any number of ways. At the very least, it's not like a certain room that's now closed.

"Hey…"

Hearing her call me, I jerked my head up, and there was Isshiki's face with a questioning expression. It seemed my hands had stopped working. To fill the awkward silence, I started talking as I wrote. "Anyway, how long should we keep doing this?"

"Yeah…it's almost time to wind down for the day."

Following Isshiki's gaze, I looked at the clock hanging by the entrance. It was already quite late. Most clubs would have called it a day by now.

Then the door underneath the clock opened.

"Oh, you're here." The one who appeared was a woman in a suit and a white coat: my homeroom teacher. She walked over to us, long black hair fluttering and high heels clicking.

"Miss Hiratsuka."

Why is she here…? I thought, confused.

She sighed in dissatisfaction. "It seems this is being added to my workload, basically… Good grief. Us young underlings are constantly being loaded with more work; it's awful."

Of course, you're one of the young ones… I found myself giving her a gentle look.

But she looked back into my eyes—and her gaze wasn't so different from mine. "…You're alone, Hikigaya? What happened to Yukinoshita and Yuigahama?"

From the way she spoke, she seemed to take it for granted that I would be there, but she'd also figured the other members of the Service Club would be present, too. *Oh, now that I think of it, Isshiki said the one who told her to do this joint event was Miss Hiratsuka, huh?*

In other words, she had to have sent Isshiki's request to be accepted by the Service Club. And indeed, in the past, maybe we would have accepted this request as a club.

But things were different now.

"Oh, no, I'm just helping as an individual." I shifted my gaze to the printouts in my hands.

"Hmm…" Miss Hiratsuka watched me steadily as I worked, saying nothing for a while. I didn't explain any further, either, focusing on moving my hands and copying out sentences and words that meant nothing to me.

"…Well, all right, then." With a short sigh, Miss Hiratsuka looked at Isshiki, then back at me again. "Hikigaya and Isshiki, huh…? An interesting combination."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I didn't find it amusing to be paired up with her. Isshiki seemed to feel the same way. I could almost hear the extreme displeasure on her face: *eugh*.

That's a little mean, Irohasu…

Seeing our expressions, Miss Hiratsuka gave a bemused smile. "Well, it's a little… Anyway, it's getting late. Go home now and do the rest another time. It looks like that's what the other kids are planning to do."

Now that she mentioned it, some of the Kaihin people were starting to get ready to leave.

"Yeah, then I guess we'll go, too," Isshiki announced to the rest of the student council, and they all started tidying their things.

Then Isshiki lowered her voice—she must have been trying to keep Miss Hiratsuka from hearing—and whispered in my ear, "I'm gonna go eat with their student council before I go home, so you can go ahead and leave first."

Inviting me isn't even an option, is it…? I'm thankful that she really

gets it. “Then I’m going,” I said.

“Roger. Well then, I’ll see you again tomorrow.” Isshiki gave me a joking salute, and I replied with a casually raised hand before heading to the door.

That was when I remembered something I’d forgotten to ask. “Oh yeah. Can I take it we’re starting at about the same time tomorrow, too?”

“Yeah, that’s generally right.”

“Roger, got it.”

The start time was probably later in the day because the Kaihin students needed a little more time to arrive at this location. For us, that meant there was some time before the meetings started.

As I wondered about how I should spend that narrow slice of time, I left the community center.

X X X

What is happiness?

It is a *kotatsu.*

“Oh, Big Bro! Welcome home.”

When I finished the long day and returned home, Komachi was in the living room. Her eyes were half-closed. She was looking pretty sleepy. The cause of her sleepiness was probably the *kotatsu*, a heater that uses a heavy blanket underneath a tabletop, which I hadn’t even noticed had been brought out into the living room.

So at last, it’s returned…this devilish machine. A *kotatsu* is a machine for the production of useless people. In my opinion, if you sent a bunch of *kotatsu* to an enemy nation in the winter, you could invade it easily.

“Komachi, don’t study under the *kotatsu*. It’ll make you sleepy, and if you fall asleep there, you’ll catch a cold. Those things ruin people,” I scolded her, but she shot me an unamused look. *Oh dearie me, is this girl in a rebellious stage…?*

“Uh, that’s funny coming from someone snuggling into it himself…”

Ha-ha-ha, what are you talking about, dear Komachi? I’m not in the kota… *Ahhh! I slid under the* kotatsu *without even realizing it?!*

While putting on this very stupid act, I really was already inside

the *kotatsu*.

…Iz so warm, meow…

After a long day and the return along the cold road at night, the infrared rays felt so nice. I stretched out my legs lazily, and they touched something soft.

And then that soft thing came to wrap around my leg. *A soft something that moves… Is it Komachi's leg?* I thought, looking over at her, and when her eyes met mine, she grinned.

To think she'd flirt with me by twining her leg around mine in the kotatsu*… Recently, my sister has been unusual… Actually, oh man, what the heck, this is really embarrassing! …That needy little brat.*

I kicked my leg out as if to say, *Cut that out*, and that soft sensation moved away.

And then something crawled out of the *kotatsu*. It was the cat, Kamakura. What had been twining around my leg had been not Komachi but him. Why do cats immediately make human legs their pillows?

After leaving the warmth, Kamakura stretched out long and exhaled a *hmf*.

C'mon, are you like a middle-aged man coming out of the sauna?

Kamakura snorted when he saw my face, disgruntled about having been kicked out. Or was it that my feet smelled…? *Don't act like that. It makes me anxious…*

"Bro, why're you glaring at Kaa like that?"

"No reason…"

He had left the *kotatsu*, but Kamakura must have been a little cold after all. He leaped onto Komachi's lap, and this time he curled up to nap there with his paws tucked in. *I'm sure he slept plenty in the afternoon, but he's still gonna sleep?*

Must be nice to be a cat. I'd like to live that kind of lifestyle, too.

Komachi started petting Kamakura on her lap. *Ahhh, if you do that, he's never gonna leave…*

Oh yeah. Watching her, I remembered something. "Hey, Komachi. What's this?" I pulled out the letter that was still in the chest pocket of my uniform.

Taking care not to move Kamakura, Komachi leaned over to examine it. “Huh?” she said calmly. “It’s exactly what it looks like.”

“Uh-huh…” *Does she seriously want household appliances…? What the heck is with this girl? If I do say so of my own sister…*

But Komachi wasn’t interested in explaining further and just petted Kamakura while humming.

…Well, I didn’t want to make things awkward by pressing her and bringing up her message at the end. I decided to take that list as a reference, while I carefully considered something else to get her.

Neither of us really talked, just passing the time in mindless silence.

Suddenly, Kamakura twitched and stood up. He scratched his ears with his back leg, and then with a crisp expression on his face, he left the living room. It looked like he was heading for the door.

That meant our mother had come home. What’s amazing about Kamakura is the way he goes to greet Mom and Komachi. By the way, he never comes to greet me or Dad.

After a while, there was the clack of the front door opening, followed by the *tmp-tmp* of footsteps going up the stairs, and then Mom appeared in the living room. Kamakura was following behind her.

“I’m home. Agh, I’m tired.” She threw her bag down where she stood and tossed back the coffee she must have bought at a café on the way back. Seeing how tired she looked, Komachi and I offered her some appreciation.

“Welcome home, Mom!”

“Yeah, bet it was a long day. Where’s Dad?” I asked, thinking that if he was home, I’d pester him for money to buy Komachi a present.

But Mom tilted her head, gave me a blank look, and replied with a vague noise.

“Huh?”

Hey, hey, Mom? You can speak words, right? You can communicate with your husband? Or are you just not interested in him at all?

“The schedule is packed at this time of year, so I doubt he can come back so easily. I’ve brought home work, too,” Mom said naturally, without any particular attempt to hide it. It seemed less

that she was uninterested and more that to her, something so obvious wasn't even worth trying to hide. Huh, I'm sure it depends on the industry, but employees at this time of year sure are busy. I wouldn't be able to take still having to work even when it was this close to Christmas, come on. I want to become the sort of adult who makes sure to spend the Christmas season with family. I'm absolutely not going to get a job.

As I was cultivating an unwavering spirit of unemployment, my mom opened her mouth as if something had suddenly struck her. "Oh yeah, Hachiman. You're not doing anything, are you? Reserve us a tub of chicken pieces. And a cake, too."

"Hmm?" I replied. *Why me? And wait, you don't necessarily know that I've got nothing to do, right?* Or *Hmm?* for short. Wait, that's not a great abbreviation, is it?

"I've always asked Komachi to do it, but this year, she's a little busy…"

"Oh, it's fine. Gimme money." I wasn't unwilling to do it if that was the reason. I'd never really thought much about it before, but when I'd been studying for exams, I'm sure Komachi did lots of stuff for me, too. Plus, she does most of the chores, normally. I should do it at times like these, at least.

When Komachi heard my reply, she jumped in. "Komachi can do that much, at least."

But for some reason, my mother waved her hand, almost laughing. "It's fine, it's fine, we're already placing a burden on you as it is, Komachi, because of our work. You should make your brother do things sometimes."

Hey, that's not how it is. It's not. I do actually have the intention to do chores. But once I decide in my heart that I'm gonna do the chores, the deed's already been done! (By Komachi.)

I was about to make an excuse, like, *It's helpful to have a competent little sister, but also tough!* But my mother was completely ignoring my reaction, pulling her wallet out of her bag. "Oh, I forgot to withdraw some cash. You mind waiting until next time?"

"Sure." After that brief reply from me, my mother gave a thank you and yawned, then cracked her shoulders and left the living room.

Watching our exhausted mother go, Komachi muttered, "She doesn't have to worry about Komachi."

"Well, that's parental affection for you. Don't worry about it.

Just study hard," I said.

Komachi frowned for a moment, then tried to cover it with a somewhat cynical smile. "Hmm, I can't say I like hearing people say that…"

"Oh, sorry. I couldn't think of any other way to say it." I'd told her to study hard on instinct. But someone studying for entrance exams hears that so often, they get sick of it. Besides, my dumb little sister can't be slacking on her studies.

I don't think you should tell someone who is already working hard to work hard. And really, when you hear that from someone who isn't working hard, it only comes across as annoying.

So then how should I support her? Mmmgh…

As I groaned to myself, Komachi smiled. "Bro, at times like these, *I love you* works."

"Is that right? I love you, Komachi."

"Komachi doesn't love you back, but thanks, Bro!"

"So cruel…" Tears welled in my eyes. Big Brother put quite a lot of heart into saying that. I'll even flash my brake lights five times for you!

After a stint of gleeful laughter, Komachi stood up. She was probably going back to her room to study. "Okay, that was a nice break."

"That's good…"

"It's important for you to have breaks, too, Bro. Like, if you're worrying too much about things, doing something else will distract you, right?"

"Well…I guess, yeah, that's right." I had been about to say, *Isn't that an excuse for running away?*

But then I remembered a certain someone who was also averting his eyes, and I couldn't bring myself to give Komachi a hard time anymore.

3

Once more, **Hachiman Hikigaya** asks himself.

In the classroom after school, I breathed a big sigh.

I had to go to the meeting at the community center to help Isshiki later that day.

I wasn't particularly bothered about that, though.

Being a part of these meetings was a pain right now, but Kaihin High School was running things. That meant those of us from Soubu would merely do as we were told. The brainstorming session had enlivened discussion, and motivation was high. "Intellectualness" was high, too.

But the thing that bothered me was the Soubu High School student council. Judging from how things had gone the day before, I couldn't say our representatives were functioning well. And the biggest factor there was likely the rocky relationship between Isshiki and the rest of student council.

It seemed having a first-year as the president presented more of a burden than expected. She was only one year younger, but a gap of one year is pretty big for us high schoolers. Both parties clearly felt that distance, and that reservation and anxiety seemed to be getting in the way of their interactions.

It'd be nice if I could have helped with that, but that was a problem for Isshiki and the student council. It wasn't a problem I could solve. I couldn't even handle our club of merely three people.

Besides, it wasn't a huge issue, as things stood. We just had to make it to Christmas.

The student council had been formed only recently. Eventually, they'd reach acquiescence—otherwise known as getting used to it.

Considering this, I breathed another sigh.

There was still some time before the meeting would start. Until then, I'd be in the clubroom. I wasn't telling Yukinoshita and Yuigahama about helping Isshiki, so I had to show up for now. I didn't want to make them suspicious by skipping all of a sudden.

That clubroom was empty. I was sure it'd be best not to bring in anything more.

But still, showing up only to head out to some unspecified task… It wasn't as if I had anything to do there, but being on standby was part of the job, too. So it could be harder than expected.

The Reality Marble that I'd learned without even realizing it, Unlimited Double Works, has activated… It seems a bizarre double life is about to begin…

Breathing a short sigh, I heaved up from my chair.

Yuigahama had already left the classroom. It wasn't as if we went to the clubroom together every single time. I think both of us were certain the other would go. That was how it had been so far, and how it would continue to be.

Leaving the classroom, I walked down the hallway to the special-use building.

It was unquestionably getting colder over time, but it really is hard to sense a clear difference over the course of just a day or two. The chilly hallway I walked through that day wasn't really much chillier than the day before. You won't sense the moment that the crisp late autumn turns into winter on a day-to-day basis.

So the clubroom down this hallway was probably indeed colder than it had been the day before. We simply hadn't noticed.

Putting my hand on the door of the clubroom, I went inside.

"Oh, Hikki."

"Hey." With a casual greeting to Yuigahama and Yukinoshita, I sat down in my chair.

I glanced around the clubroom.

Yukinoshita returned her gaze to her paperback, while Yuigahama was having a staring contest with her cell phone. As I'd expected, it wasn't much different from the day before.

One chair was by the window. One chair maintained a confused distance from it, not too close and not too far. And one chair was placed on a diagonal from that window seat, facing away.

The other chairs were piled up with the desks we didn't use.

The thin cover of dust on those desks and the small mountain of

finished books indicated the passage of a small span of time.

Yuigahama said something to Yukinoshita, and they had their usual exchange. With the sound of their trivial conversation in my ears, I picked up a paperback.

This was the daily scene we had been reenacting over and over these past few days. Nothing off could be detected here. You couldn't say anything had changed.

All that was different from before was the number of times I checked the clock.

I looked up without moving my upper body, shoulders, or neck —only my eyes. I took quiet, surreptitious glances, so as not to reveal what I was doing.

How many times had I done that, over and over? The long hand wouldn't move like I wanted it to, but finally, it arrived at the position I'd been waiting for.

The girls were discussing a different topic from a moment ago. After I was sure of their cheerful voices and peaceful smiles, I slowly exhaled.

"Oh yeah… Can I go home early today?" I asked, quietly closing my paperback.

The girls both stopped talking and looked at me. "Huh?"

It was a little early for sunset. Normally, we'd still be in the clubroom at this time.

Yuigahama must have felt this was strange, as she looked confused when she asked, "You're leaving kind of early today. Do you have something?"

"…Yeah. My mom asked me to reserve some fried chicken," I replied. The first reason that came to mind popped out of me. I had in fact been asked to do that, so on my way back, I'd stop by the KFC.

Yuigahama nodded as if that made sense to her. "Oh, reservations, huh?"

"Yeah, for Christmas. The party tubs are supposed to be pretty popular, so it's best to do it early. Though Komachi did it last year."

"Oh yes, she's studying for entrance exams now, isn't she?" Yukinoshita said in acknowledgment.

"That's the deal. So see you."

"Yeah, see you tomorrow," Yuigahama called out to me as I stood up.

Yukinoshita added, "Say hello to Komachi for me." I replied to

the both of them with a casually raised hand, then left the clubroom. Behind me, Yuigahama now started saying this and that about Komachi's entrance exams.

In the silent hallway, even through the division of the door, I could faintly hear both their voices. They tugged at my back as I left.

X X X

As soon as I was out of the school building, I headed to the community center.

Parking my bicycle in the lot, I walked a few steps and hefted up the bag on my shoulder, though it wasn't particularly heavy.

When I got to the entrance, I heard footsteps running to me from behind.

"Hiiiiiiiii!" With that call, there was a *tmp* and a light impact on my back. Even without turning around, I knew who it was. There's only one person who uses that tone, and aside from my little sister, Komachi, the only person who would do something like this is Iroha Isshiki.

"Hey," I replied, turning around, and the owner of that voice was exactly who I expected. She was puffing up her cheeks in a grumpy pout as she gave me a little glare. "That's a real nonreaction…"

"I mean, that thing you do is so manipulative…" And besides, I'm used to it from Komachi…

"Nawww, of course I'm sincere!" Isshiki pressed a hand to her cheek bashfully.

Uh, you don't have to be so deliberately calculating about it…, I thought, looking over at what Isshiki carried to see she had a bag full of snacks and plastic bottles that day, too.

Wordlessly, I reached out as if to say, *Give that here.*

Isshiki looked a bit surprised by the hand reaching out to her but then giggled and handed over the bag. "But, like, I think what you're doing is pretty manipulative, too…," she teased.

"Naw, of course I'm sincere!" Tragically, my big brother skill activated on auto. Doing something like that consciously would make me so embarrassed my hands would sweat. Agh, and once I

was conscious of it, my hands were suddenly slimy.

As we conversed, we entered the same lecture room as the day before, and I saw everyone from Kaihin and Soubu was already there.

"Oh, Iroha-chan." The student council president of the other school, Tamanawa, raised his hand and called out to Isshiki.

"Hellooo!" she replied as she sat down in the same seat as the day before, and I followed.

It seemed we were the last to arrive. Everyone sat down in their chairs one after another, and all eyes gathered on Tamanawa.

"Right. Then let's get started. Thanks again for coming, everyone." After Tamanawa made his introductory remarks, the meeting began.

First, Tamanawa confirmed the record of proceedings that we'd put together the day before. He whaled away on his MacBook Air like *clackity-clackity-SMACK*, until he seemed to get eyestrain, pressing the bridge of his nose, and opened his mouth. "Hmm, I think things still aren't quite solidified, so let's continue with the brainstorming from yesterday."

Uh, this is beyond "not quite." We had no idea what you were talking about in that meeting yesterday. And that had made the record of proceedings incredibly abstract.

I hope we can write a proper record of proceedings today, I thought as I listened to the meeting.

Kaihin got the ball rolling.

"This is a special opportunity, so it'd be nice to do something fancier."

"Yeah! That's a good idea. Like, something big, you know?"

Turning to look toward the familiar-sounding voice, I saw that the sudden, enthusiastic agreement had come from Orimoto.

Tamanawa gave his MacBook Air a serious look. "…It's true, we may have arranged something too small."

Huh? Really? Something got arranged? I looked at the record of proceedings, but I only saw stuff about utilizing strategic thinking and the rational formation of ideas, or whatever.

Maybe they'd decided something I didn't know about, off somewhere else. A little uneasy, I said to Isshiki, beside me, "Hey… I don't know what we're doing…"

"…Well, nothing specific has been decided," she replied quietly, slightly exasperated.

As for what *had* been decided currently, that was just the date, the place, and the goal.

The event was set for Christmas Eve in the large hall of the community center, with the goal of facilitating volunteer work to contribute to the local area. It would be a Christmas event for the kids at the preschool and the elderly at the senior center right next door.

But the most important thing—the actual activity—had not been decided.

I'd assumed we would now be discussing the concept and direction of that activity, but I wasn't getting that sense at all.

"So I figure we should scale it up a little." Tamanawa did a general summation of their opinions, then asked Isshiki, "What do you think?"

"Hmm, I guess so." When he asked her opinion, Isshiki smiled sunnily and answered vaguely. Tamanawa smiled back, apparently taking that as a yes.

Then from nearby, I heard a sigh. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw it was from the vice president.

I agreed.

Even if I was merely the humble helper, I didn't want my workload blindly and indiscriminately increased. I had to make sure to argue against this. "Isshiki, we don't have the time or the manpower to do anything bigger." There was no point in addressing the room, since I was nothing more than one simple laborer, so I had meant to only whisper in her ear. Then our side's representative, Isshiki, would speak for me.

But it seemed Tamanawa had heard that, too.

"No, no, don't be like that." With some rather sweeping gestures, Tamanawa began to instruct not just me but everyone present. "When brainstorming, you don't reject opinions. If issues of time or personnel prevent expansion, then we ask how we manage that. That's how we develop the discussion. You can't come to any conclusions right away. That's why your opinion is invalid."

O-okay… You rejected my opinion fairly instantly, considering…

Tamanawa gave me a charming, nice-guy smile. "Let's discuss how to make it possible!"

So you've already decided to scale it up…?

Nobody objected to Tamanawa's proposal. Or rather, his speech just now had prohibited any negative opinions from being raised.

After that, we heard several ideas on how to scale up the feel of the event and how to actualize it.

"How about involving the local community?"

"We aim to close the generation gap."

Though I was basically recording the events of the meeting, we kept getting proposals I wasn't sure whether to write down or not.

"Why don't we bring in more of the nearby high schools?" Yet another idea from Kaihin.

Come on now; why do overly compensating (lol) types want to do things as groups so badly? I wonder if their intellect was so high, it caused them to ascend to another dimension, leading them to dream that they had become part of the Data Overmind.

But there was no benefit to be had in including additional high schools. It was already unmanageable as it was, and most of all, if any more people got into this with more ideas, nothing would ever get resolved. And there would certainly be even more work, too. That was the one thing I had to avoid…

But if I were to simply reject that idea, my objection would be crushed again. What could I do to avoid that?

…I have no choice.

When rejecting their ideas, I'd have to be indirect and play by their rules when I chose my words. That would mean things would get long, so it'd really be difficult to get Isshiki to speak for me.

"I'm just tentatively joining the brainstorming process, but to offer my own counterproposal to that last suggestion, I think it may be best to hope for the greatest synergistic effect by engineering a more seamless liaison between the schools—what do you think?" I worked in a bunch of jargon, thinking to myself, *How do you like this?!* The sudden statement from an unexpected source brought up a stir of murmurs. Orimoto, who was sitting diagonally from me, stared at me blankly.

But right now, there was only one person I was trying to persuade.

And I was right. Tamanawa loved the jargon and jumped on it.

"…I see. Then we should go with something other than a high school. So university students!"

So that's no good, huh…? Damn it! At this rate, this is going to spiral way out of control. I have to do a follow-up attack now. "Uh, hold on. Then we'll be unable to take critical initiative. And obtaining congruity with stakeholders requires a partnership where

a clear mission statement can be unmistakably whiteboarded…”

“Hey, what are you talking about…?” Isshiki was drawing away in horror. Oh, I didn’t really understand what I was saying myself. Mission statements had nothing to do with it, either. But I had to say this now.

Raising the jargon content ratio had been an act of desperation, but Tamanawa nodded in approval. “Indeed. So then…”

Good, good. It seems like I’ve persuaded him this time! Aw, he gets it, once you talk to him. He’s a pretty good guy. So I’ve argued a man down again? I want to know failure!

Or so I thought for but a brief moment, when Tamanawa stuck up his index finger. “How about having the nearby elementary school join? That could gain us favor from a different sector, aside from us high school students!”

“…What?” *What is he talking about…?*

While I was still reeling from his sudden proposal, Tamanawa further elucidated his idea. It seemed he very much liked his own proposal. “Hmm, I suppose they call it gamification? If we design it so they have fun while performing tasks, we may be able to get help from the local elementary school students as well.”

“That’s a win-win solution,” someone from Kaihin agreed.

Then Orimoto clapped her hands and pointed at that guy. “A win-win! Yeah, that’s it!”

But why…?

It seemed not only Orimoto but the majority of the others also agreed. Tamanawa nodded in satisfaction and seemed to assume that it was decided, as he started giving directions. “We’ll handle making appointments and negotiation with the elementary school. I hope I can ask the Soubu student council to handle things after that,” he said to Isshiki with a broad smile.

But Isshiki was staying noncommittal. “I guess we could,” she said, in a way you couldn’t take as a yes or a no. She’d never been keen on this job in the first place—she had to feel negatively about increasing the workload. And that made her reluctant.

But Tamanawa pushed her. “How about it?”

“…Okay, we’re on it!” Isshiki replied with a beaming and brilliant smile.

Well, of course she did. From where she stood, he was an older boy and also the student council president of another school. He wasn’t someone she could refuse that easily. They’d probably been

forcing ideas on her like this the whole time.

Now it was certain we'd be getting more work.

I heard another sigh from the vice president. I felt ready to do the same. Nothing but sighs!

On its own, having our workload increased was grating.

It would be best for me to resist a little here and there and bet on the chance that it would reduce my work, even slightly. I'm willing to work as hard as I have to, if it means less work…

"Hey, is it all right for us to be deciding this on our own?" I asked.

"I think it would be meaningful for us to display initiative," Tamanawa replied as he pushed aside his bangs with a *fwsh!*

Conversing with this guy makes my head hurt… Pressing my forehead, I said, "That's not what I mean… If we're gonna have the elementary school kids help out, then the kids will have to participate in the event itself. And that's gonna cause capacity problems with the venue."

They had decided on the community center as the venue in the initial stages, and that decision was obviously not going to be overturned. So then there was an upper limit to the number of people who could participate in the event. We couldn't just toss anyone and everyone into it.

When I explained this, Isshiki nodded. "Oh, that's right. And we don't know how many people will be coming from the preschool or the senior center…"

You haven't even confirmed that…?

It seemed to me there was a lot we had to do before we scaled this thing up, but still, Tamanawa wouldn't give in. He incorporated my opinion but stuck to his argument. "Hmm, then we'll check that. And if we can discuss other matters as well while we're at it, that would be even better. Then we decide the number of elementary school kids participating and try contacting them."

So it was decided what we were doing, for now.

Soubu would confirm with the preschool, while Kaihin would be going to the senior center, and based on what we got there, we would approach the elementary school.

Well, it is what it is… I'd succeeded in limiting the number of people participating. I figured I should appreciate that I'd avoided having to deal with an unspecified majority.

That's right, Hachiman! But I suppose there might be good in things,

even if we don't see it!

Finishing up the meeting—or rather, brainstorming—for the time being, each of us decided to get straight to our tasks.

"Um, what do we do now?" Isshiki started off, once she'd gathered me and the Soubu student council together. "There's other work to do, so I'm thinking we should decide who's going to the preschool and who'll put together the record of proceedings…"

Hmm. Well, there was no need for everyone to bother heading over to the preschool just for confirmation. It should be fine for just a few to go there. The question was who would go, but…on that point, there was frankly no need to bother discussing it.

Before I could offer a comment, the vice president reluctantly began, "Perhaps you should be handling any negotiations, President…"

Isshiki's shoulders slumped. "O-oh… Yeah, true. Of course…"

Well, it'd be fair enough to have a representative go at a time like this. Rather than deciding on who would go do that, Isshiki should have been assigning tasks to the rest of us right now.

The vice president must have had some concerns of his own, as he added, with some reservation, "Yeah…and I think there'll be a lot of other things, too… Not just this…"

"Agh…yeah."

Isshiki's attitude made the vice president give a tiny sigh.

Oh, so that was what his sigh during the meeting meant?

Unlike me, he was not displeased about the increase of the workload.

The source of his dissatisfaction was Isshiki.

I see… I really do get that subcontractor feeling here, in a bad way.

The Soubu High School student council, vice president included, wanted Iroha Isshiki to act more presidential.

But she was constantly deferring to the other student council president, and she tended to let him force his ideas on her. What's more, because she was a first-year, she was also diffident with students from our school. The way the student council saw it, they probably wanted her to stop worrying over all that and get to work now.

Well, it's human nature to worry, so just telling her not to wouldn't necessarily make her stop. They had no choice but to carry on with this awkward relationship for a while.

But since I was the one who had made Isshiki the president, I

also had some responsibility there. I had to support her properly for the duration of the event.

"I'll come with you to the preschool, Isshiki. Let's have the others handle the rest while we're gone." I turned to the vice president. "That's okay, right?"

He nodded.

Watching our exchange, Isshiki seemed a bit relieved, and her expression softened. "Right. Then that's what's happening. I'll go make the call," she declared, and she pulled out her phone to contact the preschool. Though we were going there only for a confirmation and a brief meeting, we couldn't suddenly barge in unannounced. We had to make an appointment beforehand.

While I was waiting for her to finish her call, I zoned out, thinking, *Nothing to do, huh…?* And then from the corner of my eye, a familiar face approached.

Orimoto casually raised a hand and came to talk to me. "Hey, Hikigaya, when you were in middle school, were you on the student council or anything?"

"No, I wasn't."

We were in the same middle school, and you don't even know that? I thought, but considering further, even I didn't remember anyone from the student council at the time. The reason was actually because none of them had inflicted trauma on me, so I get the sense they were probably good people. I feel bad for forgetting them. They didn't deserve it.

It seemed Orimoto was searching her own memories of the past, as she nodded. "Yeah, yeah, of course. But you seem kinda used to this stuff, don't you?"

"Not at all," I replied, but thanks to my involvement with the cultural festival and athletic festival and such over the course of nearly a year, I'd accumulated some basic EXP. I'd gained a level of tolerance to this kind of work, compared with before.

"Actually, like, now that I think of it, why are you helping out?"

"Well, because I was asked."

"Huh…" My explanation made her pause for a moment. She gave me a hard look, and it was a little uncomfortable. I twisted around to escape from her gaze, and that was when she asked me something outrageous.

"You broke up with your girlfriend?"

“What?” I asked her back, unable to really understand what she meant by that question. *What is she talking about…?*

Orimoto glanced over at Isshiki, who was on the phone off to the side. “Oh, I figured that’s why you’re going for Isshiki-chan.”

Uh, like I said, what are you talking about…? Isshiki’s cute, but I wouldn’t get anywhere with a girl like her, and I wouldn’t even want to in the first place. “I’m not going for her… And I haven’t broken up with anyone. I’ve never even had a girlfriend.”

Why do I have to hear this stuff from the girl I confessed to a long time ago? Is this some kind of new long-term bullying tactic? I just love the way I answer honestly, regardless. If this were *Japanese Folktales*, I’d come out successful in the end. Oh wait, that wouldn’t work; I don’t have a dog. Or a lump. Wait, was the lump a different story?

Orimoto blinked.

“Oh, is that right…? I thought you were dating one of those girls.”

Which girls…? I asked with a look.

Orimoto understood my silent question and spun her index finger in the air. “You know, those girls from when we hung out.”

There was only one time when Orimoto and I had hung out, but the two of us hadn’t gone out alone or anything. Hayama had also been there, along with Orimoto’s friend. More accurately, though, I’d been an extra added in to fill out the group.

That was when Hayama had schemed an encounter with two girls—Yukinoshita and Yuigahama. Orimoto had to be talking about them.

“They’re…just in the same club as me.”

I couldn’t quite come up with the words to accurately signify our relationship. I’d meant to state the plain facts, but I didn’t know if that was correct. Anyway, how well did I understand the meaning of the words *the same club*?

As I was about to start considering that, Orimoto cut my thoughts off with a dumb-sounding “Huuuh?!” noise. “So you’re in a club? What club?”

“…The Service Club.” I didn’t know how to explain it, but if I told some weird lie and we wound up talking more about it, I’d be in trouble.

Orimoto’s reaction to my plain, truthful answer was to burst into laughter. “What the heck, I have no clue what you mean!

That's so funny."

"Uh, no, it's not…"

She clutched her stomach as she laughed hard. Well, it was true that I didn't really get the point of the Service Club. But it wasn't particularly funny.

I really couldn't laugh about it.

X X X

Once Isshiki finished her call, I accompanied her to the preschool. It was basically next door to the community center, so it was easy to meet people there. And because it was a public day care center, it was easy to talk to the school administration.

Isshiki had just scheduled an appointment, so when we arrived, we were immediately let inside.

The sights of the preschool, which I'm sure were buried somewhere in my memory, and a wafting sweet scent like powdered milk made me feel somehow nostalgic.

I didn't know if I should call them classrooms, but in the rooms I could see through the glass windows, everything was tiny. Inside, little kids were playing with wooden blocks and running around. Stuck up on the walls were indecipherable crayon pictures with wriggling characters, with flair added by tulips and shooting star decorations made from colored paper.

I'd gone to preschool, too, but I don't remember much from that time. Back then, I think there's a possibility someone told me, "*Zawsze* in love," or I got a key or lock or something, but unfortunately, I don't remember at all.

Being somewhat curious, I was looking around appreciatively, when through the glass, my eyes met with those of a day care worker inside the room.

She whispered a bit with the other day care worker beside her. From her look, she was clearly suspicious of me. Yes, all you mothers, the crisis management at this preschool is perfect! I recommend it!

I scooted away at once and called out to Isshiki, who was walking ahead. "Looks like I'm not very welcome here."

"Yeah…you've got a scary look in your eyes, after all…," Isshiki

said, looking straight at me.

That was mean! I thought she'd say something in my defense!

However, even if we'd called beforehand, of course they'd be a little wary to see a high school boy appearing in his uniform. It wouldn't be good for me to continue following her and scare the children and the day care workers.

"…Actually, I'll go wait over there." I pointed to a place in the hallway by the wall where the kids wouldn't see me.

Isshiki put a hand to her waist and breathed a big sigh. "Guess you have to, huh? Then I'll deal with things here."

"Thanks," I said, sending her off. It seemed she was going to go talk in the staff room that was just past here, as she continued straight on down the hall.

But anyway, waiting here despite having come all this way was, like, the most useless thing possible.

Now then, how do I kill time until Isshiki's done talking with them? I wondered as I checked around the area. I could sit down in the hallway, but that would make me even more of a shady character. I was staying behind to avoid making the kids and day care workers suspicious, so doing that would be voiding the point.

I've got no choice. I guess I'll stand here and zone out…

A long time ago, I did this day-labor job working for the display of model rooms in an apartment building, and I held a sign for hours under the blazing sun, standing there and doing nothing else, so this was no big deal. Back then, I'd killed the time zoning out for about eight hours. It was a pretty tough job, but there were so many deductions, like from the temp agency and for insurance and stuff, it made me tear up… *Yikes, is my wage this low…?*

In comparison, this place had a roof and walls, and it was just for a short time. That alone made it seem like a good work environment… *Yikes, is my aptitude for corporate slavery this high…?*

I was spacing out like that, thinking trivial thought after trivial thought, when the door of a nearby classroom opened gingerly.

What's that? I wondered, looking over to see a young girl tiptoe out. She sneaked over to the entrance, where she started looking all around. Stretching up and jumping in a very cute and nimble manner, she did her best to see outside, but when she couldn't see anything, she trudged back.

Her bluish-black hair was divided into two pigtails and tied with scrunchies. That, combined with her pretty, cherubic face,

made for a very adorable little girl.

When she noticed me, she called out a quiet "Ah!" and approached me.

Then she tugged on the sleeve of my blazer and looked up at me, open-mouthed.

This isn't good—is this, like, where I get reported to the cops for suspicious behavior or something? But we're inside a preschool, and there's no one else here, so it's okay, right…?

"…Hi. What's up?" Of course, I couldn't ignore her in this situation, so I tried to keep my tone calm as I addressed her.

Then she tugged even harder on my sleeve, so I slowly bent down. Once I was about on her eye level, she said with worry, "Hey, Saa-chan isn't here yet."

"Oh…is that right?"

What's a Saa-chan…? Does she mean her mom? Small children do mix up their words a lot when they talk. When Komachi was little, she called me Big Bo instead of Big Bro. I'd think for sure she was Tora-san.

I'd built up a resistance to little kids, thanks to having Komachi, but of course I didn't remember how I'd handled her when she was this little. I'd been young, too, after all. *So then how should I deal with this…?* Whatever the case, I couldn't let her go outside on her own. So then should I take her back into the classroom?

"Saa-chan will show up soon. Go play over there until then." Gently pushing her little shoulders, I brought her to the classroom door. She was surprisingly obedient, coming to the classroom with me.

Then, right when I was about to reach out to the glass sliding door, she tugged on my sleeve again. "Oh! That's Saa-chan," she said, pointing to a crayon picture posted on the classroom wall.

I have no idea which picture she's pointing to… She'd probably drawn a picture of her mom or something. But since there were multiple pictures up, I didn't know which one it was.

"Which one's Saa-chan?"

"That one!" The little girl pointed vaguely at the wall. But with all the pictures taped there, I really couldn't tell.

Hmm… I wonder which it is…

I crouched down again to look from the girl's perspective. "… Okay, I get it. This is right." I raised my right hand. "So then, this is left." Then I showed her my other hand.

She nodded, raising her hands in the same way as she repeated, “Right, left.”

“You got it. Okay, raise your right,” I said, and she energetically shot up her right hand. “Now raise your left.” This time her left hand leaped up with vigor. *Hmm. Looks like she understands right and left properly.*

So, then…, I thought, pointing to a picture stuck on the wall. “Okay, here’s a puzzle. How many from the right is Saa-chan?”

The new game made the little girl’s eyes sparkle. She started to count, folding down her fingers. “Ummm…the fourth!”

“Right. Good job,” I said, lightly patting her head. *I see—so that’s Saa-chan…*

…Yep, no idea who that would be. In the end, I couldn’t tell which was the correct picture. But I’d spent a bit of time with her, and that must have distracted her for a while.

When I was about to prompt her to go into the classroom, a kind voice called out from behind. “Kei-chan.”

I turned around to see someone quite familiar. It was my classmate Saki Kawasaki.

The little girl she’d called Kei-chan broke into a beaming smile and ran off. “Saa-chan!”

When Kei-chan jumped on her, Kawasaki tenderly petted her hair. Then she gave me a suspicious look. “…Why are you here?”

“Um, well, work…”

I actually wanted to ask Kawasaki why she was there, but before I could ask, she opened her mouth. She shot a stealthy searching look around behind me. “Hmph… Where’s Yukinoshita and Yuigahama?”

I’d figured she would ask that. If I was going to mention work, that would refer to Service Club activities. Kawasaki had been involved with those a few times before, so it was natural for her to be asking that. But there was no need to bother telling her about what was going on. She hadn’t been probing that deeply, and telling her about our private affairs would just make her uncomfortable. So I’d keep it simple.

“…They’ve got other stuff to do. I’m here alone.”

Kawasaki gave me a hard look, but then she said, “…Oh,” and briefly looked away as if disinterested.

“You?” I threw the question back at her, and Kawasaki gently grabbed the shoulder of the little girl she’d called Kei-chan.

Then she muttered with shy hesitation, “I…came to pick up my sister.”

“Ohhh.” *Ahhh, so Kei-chan is her little sister? That’s good… For a second there, I was worried she was Kawasaki’s daughter…*

But now that she explained it, their facial features really did resemble each other’s. Kei-chan had a pretty hopeful future. *I pray she will grow up into a meek and modest girl, ’cause her big sister is scary.*

With that wish for Kei-chan in my heart, I looked between the Kawasaki sisters. I’m not sure how Kawasaki interpreted my gaze, but she sounded a little flustered as she said, “Oh, um, this is my little sister, Keika… Come on, Kei-chan, say your name.”

“Keika Kawasaki!” When prompted, Keika raised her hand energetically, as if she were responding to roll call.

“I’m Hachiman.” Feeling my heart warmed by Keika’s cheer, I told her my name in return, and she blinked her big eyes.

“…Hachi…man? …That’s a weird name!”

“H-hey! Kei-chan!” Kawasaki hastily admonished her, but her tone was still kind. She seemed softer than she was normally. She was actually being a proper big sister, completely different from when she fusses over her brother.

“I think it’s a weird name, too, so it’s fine. Anyway, so you pick her up and drop her off, huh? That’s a lot of work,” I said.

Kawasaki was curt. “Not really… Normally, our parents do it. I help out on days I don’t have cram school.”

“But don’t you live pretty far away?” Kawasaki’s house is in a different school district from my middle school, but I think it’s not far from my house. From there to here would be about a station or two on the train, I guess. I don’t really know if that’s a fair distance for a kid’s day care, but it’s definitely not in the neighborhood. That seemed tough.

But Kawasaki stroked her own long hair as she said quietly, “Yeah, but when they drop her off, it’s by car… Right now there aren’t many openings at preschools, and this municipal one is cheap.”

“Huh, I see.” *She’s kinda domestic.*

A little impressed, I was looking at her when the shopping bag in her hand caught my eye. She must have done some shopping for dinner before coming, and the green onions sticking out of the bag looked even more domestic.

“Before, I was always working, so I couldn’t come, though…”

“Ahhh, now that you mention it, yeah.”

“Uh-huh…,” Kawasaki replied, and her voice was warm, her gaze focused on Keika. Then suddenly, that gaze shifted toward me.

Looking at me hesitantly, her lips started moving silently as if she was struggling to say something. It didn’t seem like she’d spit it out even if I waited, but when she just stood there, it made me think she was gonna say something. I found myself fidgeting.

This is kinda embarrassing, so don’t… “…What?” I asked.

Kawasaki shook her head hard. “I-it’s nothing.” Her ponytails swayed restlessly as she did, and Keika followed the trail of the ends with her eyes, like a cat.

When I was drawn to look over, too, I saw Isshiki at the end of the hallway.

“Oh, there you are. Heeey!”

Isshiki was on her way back, seemingly finished with her discussion in the staff room. If she’d finished the confirmation and the meeting, then our job was now over. Not that I did anything.

“…U-um, I’m not intruding, am I?” Isshiki asked in concern as she noticed Kawasaki’s presence.

Kawasaki glanced back at Isshiki, and Isshiki froze up with a frightened twitch.

Oh, that’s normal for Kawasaki, so you don’t have to be scared. She might look like a delinquent glaring at you, but she’s all bark and no bite. She’s a good girl. But if I were to explain it like that, Kawasaki would probably get angry again.

While I was wondering what I should say, Kawasaki flicked her hair back and turned away, then put her hand on the glass sliding door. It looked like she meant to say good-bye to the day care workers, then get going home. “…See you,” she turned halfway back to say, then pulled Keika’s hand.

Keika squeezed Kawasaki’s hand back as she raised her free hand, waving it wide. “Bye-bye, Haa-chan!”

“Yeah, see you.” Casually raising a hand, I waved back at her.

But where did “Haa-chan” come from? Does she not remember my name? Let’s make sure to keep track of people’s names. You must never do it the lazy way and remember it as, like, “Hachi-something.”

As I watched the two of them go, Isshiki stood next to me and shifted her gaze from the departing Kawasaki to me. Sounding a little confused, she said timidly, “Y-your acquaintances are all kind

of unique, huh…?”

I won’t deny it, but you’re one of those unique acquaintances, too…

X X X

It was the day after our visit to the preschool. The end-of-day homeroom was over, and I was stretching a little.

I was still somewhat tired from the day before.

Physically speaking, it was nothing, but time spent too pointlessly can wear on you.

Ultimately, all we had to show for the work of the day before was an estimate of the number of participants from the preschool; plus, we’d listened to their moderate requests. The update of the meeting’s records did also count, I guess, but we hadn’t had much of a meeting in the first place.

As I thought about how that day would probably be more of the same, a particularly big yawn came out of me. I breathed out my feelings of melancholy with a great *fwahhh*.

As I was wiping off the tears that had formed, Totsuka was putting his hand on the sliding door, and our eyes met. It seemed he’d seen my yawn.

Totsuka retraced his steps back to my seat, and then with a lightly closed hand, he covered his mouth and giggled in amusement. If he’s gonna smile at me like that, I’m gonna quite amusingly lose it.

“You seem kind of tired,” he said to me, maybe because of my enormous yawn just now.

It was true that I was a little tired, but I couldn’t possibly brag about being tired in front of Totsuka. Playing up how tired you are is just as obnoxious as playing up how drunk you are. Why do guys think that’ll get you girls? It actually makes you look dumb. In fact, I think from now on, you’ll have better luck playing up that you don’t drink.

Based on the above, right now I think playing up how not tired I am will be effective on Totsuka!

“I’m always like this,” I said jokingly, and Totsuka smiled back at me.

“Now that you mention it, I guess so.”

I'd been sighing so much, but now not a single one would come out. It felt like I would breathe a pink sigh instead. Does Totsuka's laughter have an effect like 1/f fluctuation? By the way, I think that *f* stands for *fairy*…

As the negative ions generated by Totsuka's smile worked their placebo effect on me, Totsuka tugged his tennis bag up on his shoulder.

"You have your club now?" I asked.

"Yeah! You too, right, Hachiman?"

"…Yeah."

"…?" My strange pause made Totsuka tilt his head slightly.

To cover for that, I made an effort to sound cheerful as I said, "Well, do your best at your club."

"You too, Hachiman. Do your best."

"Yeah."

Totsuka did a tiny wave in front of his chest and left the classroom. I watched him leave with a smile on my face. But even after he'd disappeared into the hallway, I didn't feel like getting up yet.

Leaning into the back of my chair, I looked up at the ceiling.

And then in my periphery, I spotted Yuigahama.

She was fidgeting as she looked over at me from a distance. It seemed she'd been waiting for the moment when we would finish talking.

Sitting up again, I showed her implicitly that she could come over, and she approached with slightly awkward steps.

Standing across from me, she examined my face with unease. "…Are you coming to club today?" she asked.

I didn't know how to answer.

Had my leaving early the other day made her worry? Seeing her face, I couldn't bring myself to say I wasn't. *Don't look at me with those puppy dog eyes… I get it; I'll go.* "Yeah. Let's get going…"

"Roger! Then I'll go get my bag," she said and went back to her seat. I left the classroom before her and decided to wait for her in the hallway to the special-use building.

I spent my time in the empty hallway thinking about the approaching club time and work on the event that would follow.

There still wasn't a lot of work to do yet.

But thinking about the plans down the line, it was an undeniable fact that we wouldn't have enough time. In order to

secure the time to do the work, we might need to move the meeting time up.

Which meant that at some point, they'd probably have to tell me to skip out of the club.

But I didn't want to skip out, if possible. It'd probably be best not to let it prevent me from attending the club. Ultimately, I'd just have to do as I had the other day, leaving early and spending less time there.

While I was thinking, there was the soft impact of a *bmfff* at my waist. *Ow, what is that…?* I thought, turning around to see Yuigahama standing there, looking grumpy. It seemed she'd lightly thumped me with the bag in her hands.

"Why'd you go without me again?"

"Like I said before, I did wait…"

While walking down the hallway to the clubroom, we repeated the exchange we'd had the other day. It was the usual reiteration, preestablished harmony. I took it for granted, since that time was about to begin again.

If there was anything at all different, I suppose it would be the fact that matters had been divided into the time before Isshiki's request and the time after it. I'd warn Yuigahama in advance that I'd be leaving before I normally would again.

"…Oh, I might head out early today. And, well, it'll be sort of like that for a while, I guess," I said.

Yuigahama nodded, then said, "Helping Iroha-chan?"

Her question startled me. "…You knew?"

"Obviously, seeing the way you've been acting." She added a laugh to cover the awkwardness of the moment.

Well, since I'd been leaving the club all alone and then looking tired in class, I guess she'd infer something was going on, at least. I was frustrated with my own thoughtlessness. If Yuigahama could figure it out, then it wouldn't be strange for someone else to have noticed, too.

"Yukinoshita, too?" I asked, and Yuigahama's gaze turned out the window.

"Hmm…I don't know. We don't talk about you."

I couldn't guess Yuigahama's expression. But it seemed to me that her quiet tone was a preclusion on any further questions. Her answer, vague and incomplete, was an embodiment of our situation. I feel as if we were constantly trying to avoid saying anything

decisive.

After that, we didn't say a word as we walked through the empty hallway.

All that sounded was our footsteps.

As usual, Yuigahama was looking outside.

That prompted me to look over to the windows on the opposite side.

At this time of year, winter solstice was approaching. The sun had descended quite a bit, even though it was early in the day, and the special-use building felt even darker than before. It had never gotten much sun to begin with.

When we entered a shadow, Yuigahama muttered, "…Are you gonna go at it alone again?"

Though it was dim around her, I could see her face clearly. Her eyes were sadly lowered, and she was biting her lip weakly. Even though I'd done what I did to keep her from making a face like that.

In an attempt to shake off the constricting feeling in my chest, I walked faster. "I'm just doing this because there's something that needs to be done. You don't have to worry about it."

"I am worrying…," Yuigahama said with a troubled smile.

Seeing that smile, the question from that time reared its head.

I wasn't wrong, was I?

The answer to the question I'd been asking myself continuously since then had emerged a long time ago.

I was wrong. I'm sure of it.

The days since the student council election spoke of that vividly. Yuigahama's sad smile showed it to me. The resignation in Yukinoshita's eyes made it impossible to ignore.

That was why I had to take responsibility for it. You should embrace the consequences of your own actions, obviously.

I couldn't rely on other people to correct my own mistakes. How could I cause even more trouble for others? It seemed to me that if I relied on someone and then made another mistake, then forcing them to make an effort and then wasting it would be the greatest betrayal of their trust.

In order to avoid making any further mistakes, I considered what I should do, based on righteous rules and principles.

For now, I had to avoid causing Yuigahama any undue concern.

"There are other things you should be worried about besides me, aren't there?" I exhaled a small breath, then relaxed my mouth

in a smile. I was changing the topic, knowing it was cowardly.

"Yeah…," Yuigahama replied, voice faint and eyes lowered.

As we walked down the hallway of the special-use building, our feet became gradually heavier. It was like we were walking through tar.

Making our way along far slower than usual, finally, we saw the door of the clubroom.

Was the room already unlocked? She was the only one with the key, and we had never even touched it.

Suddenly, Yuigahama's feet stopped. I stopped with her. She was looking at the clubroom.

"Maybe Yukinon wanted to be student council president…"

"…I don't know."

There was no way to confirm now. Considering Yukinoshita's personality, even if I asked her, she probably wouldn't answer honestly. I doubted she'd say now what she hadn't then. I also had no interest in trying to ask something she'd probably never answer.

No, I probably didn't want her to answer.

I think, at least superficially, neither she nor I will ever mourn a past that can never be regained. It would have been so much easier if she would have just berated me.

But Yuigahama was the one person who would bring up the past that neither I nor Yukinoshita would mention—and not in the weak-sounding tone she'd used before, but in a voice with clear determination. "…I really think we should've accepted that request as a club."

When Isshiki had come to talk to us, Yuigahama had said the same thing. At the time, I hadn't asked her why, but since she was bringing it up again, she must have some appropriate rationale for it. When I looked her in the eye, Yuigahama communicated that clearly.

"I think Yukinon would've ended up accepting the request before."

"What makes you think that?"

"'Cause I think it's like her to try to overcome things. It's sorta… I don't know, she'd use the fact that she couldn't become president as a reason to grapple with something even bigger, you know…" She spoke with both passion and hesitation, as if considering and making sure of each and every word.

Maybe that was why I found myself staring at her. Those

clumsy but warm words were very much like her.

Yuigahama trailed off—maybe because I was facing her directly. Then she continued, sounding less confident. “That’s why I thought this might be a good little push…”

“Oh…”

What’s lost will not return.

If you want to make up for it, you need something even greater.

There’s what was lost itself and the damage caused by the loss. You have to make up for both of those things. That’s what atonement is.

If Yukinoshita was the person I’d thought she was, then surely she would make up for her own actions herself. Maybe Yuigahama’s idea wasn’t wrong.

Yuigahama had thought it through this much. She acknowledged that a request connected to student council might be painful to Yukinoshita, and yet she’d thought that maybe, it was worth trying.

Then what about me?

Hadn’t I made this decision to keep this space from deteriorating even further, from becoming even more empty than it already was? I was doing this to protect myself, to satisfy my own feelings, and she was confronting me with the fact. I couldn’t help but look away from Yuigahama.

“…Well, maybe it would have been before… Now I don’t know.”

“Yeah…,” Yuigahama replied in a subdued tone. She’d probably also realized the odds were not great.

When Isshiki had come to the clubroom, Yukinoshita’s attitude had been different from the last time.

It had seemed as if she’d lost her fixation on requests and consultations.

She was probably on the other side of this door right now, sitting there quietly just like before, as if she’d given up on something and forgotten it.

I finally put my hand on the sliding door of the clubroom, after taking far more time than usual to arrive.

Opening the door, I went in first, and Yuigahama followed after.

“Yahallo!” Yuigahama greeted with particular cheer.

Yukinoshita, sitting by the window, looked over at us. “Hello.”

"…'Sup." Returning her greeting, I sat down in my chair, which was not going to move again.

Looking over at Yukinoshita, I saw nothing about her that was different from the day before. If there was anything, it was just that her stack of finished books was one volume higher. Like the futile stone towers children build in the river of purgatory.

Yuigahama must have been checking her text messages or something, as her thumbs were darting around. I was about to pull a paperback out of my bag, as per usual, but suddenly my hand stopped.

Before we idled away this frozen time, there was something I should say to Yukinoshita. I'd already told Yuigahama, but I had to say I'd be leaving the club early for a while from now on.

"Hey, can I say something?"

When I addressed her, Yukinoshita's shoulders twitched. I hadn't meant to speak that loudly, but the echo was greater than I'd expected in the quiet room. Yuigahama stood up straight, too, and turned her gaze to me.

Yukinoshita looked at me, still for a while. Then, as if reconsidering suddenly, she closed her book and opened her mouth. "…What is it?"

Her composed voice and intellectual gaze were directed at me. I'm sure my expression was similar.

"Can I leave early for a while?" I said.

Yukinoshita blinked two, three times. Then she put her hand to her jaw in a considering gesture. "Well, it's not as if we're particularly busy…" I waited for her to continue, but she never did.

"Well, um, you know… I've got lots of stuff going on… And Komachi has her entrance exams coming up." That reason I'd offered was not completely made-up. But even so, I couldn't say the full truth. I think there are things you should be allowed to leave unsaid and unknown.

"…I see." Yukinoshita gently stroked the cover of the paperback in her hands. It seemed she was still considering something, and even if I waited, it would take some time to get a clear conclusion back from her.

Yuigahama had been watching this happen and took over the discussion. "…But maybe that's best, huh, since there isn't much we can do for Komachi-chan. So then let's have Hikki make up for us with his effort! Right, Yukinon?" Yuigahama leaned onto her desk,

and when she turned to Yukinoshita, she responded with a faint smile.

"…Yes, you're right."

"…Sorry," I said, scratching my head unconsciously, and Yukinoshita gave a small shake of her head as if to say, *Don't worry about it.* And then the room regained its deathly silence.

As if attempting to fill that silence, Yuigahama added, "Oh, I know. I'll text Komachi-chan." Yuigahama must have gone straight to carrying out that idea as soon as it was out of her mouth, as she started to tap out a message.

Once again, I was reminded of just how Yuigahama had been supporting this atmosphere the whole time. All by herself, she'd been keeping these crumbling relationships intact.

Our exchanges were trivial, nothing out of the ordinary. I think depending on one's outlook, this was a completely amiable time we spent together.

I thought of a world where we reached conclusions via negotiation and management. Where we discussed issues properly until we all agreed, suggested answers that would convince everyone, and established it as the collective will—

Was this correct? I swallowed such questions.

The breath that came out instead was unpleasantly hot, and it dried out my throat horribly. I found myself looking at the tea set we were no longer using.

4

That's why **Saika Totsuka** feels admiration.

After I made it through our time in the clubroom, I headed to the community center and switched my brain to work mode. I waited by the entrance for a while for Isshiki to arrive, but she never showed up, even once it was the usual time.

Maybe she'd gone in without me earlier. I decided to give up on waiting for her and head into the lecture room.

The community center felt quieter than usual. It seemed that usual dance or whatever club activity wasn't happening that day, but I could hear voices coming from the lecture room we used.

When I opened the rather loud sliding door and went inside, I found most of those voices were from Kaihin High School. Comparatively, there wasn't much conversation from the Soubu kids.

"'Sup," I called out, and after setting my bag down, I suddenly noticed something. Isshiki, who I'd assumed would have arrived before I did, was not there. "Where's Isshiki?" I asked.

The vice president, sitting nearby, appeared surprised. "She isn't here yet… You didn't come together?"

When I shook my head in response, the vice president asked the other members of the student council, "Has anyone heard anything?"

"Sorry, I tried texting her…," said one girl. I assumed she was a first-year, judging from the respectful manner in which she spoke to the vice president. She was probably their clerk or treasurer or something like that. She had glasses and a braid and wore her uniform precisely to school regulations. She seemed like the quiet type. Kind of timid, too.

She was a first-year like Isshiki, but it didn't seem they were close. I'd never really seen them talking to each other, and even now, the girl was only texting instead of calling. I guess there's a boundary line somewhere between those two methods of communication. It's so complicated…

That girl gave me and the vice president a cautious glance as she muttered, "She might still be at her club."

I realized it was very possible. Before Isshiki had become student council president, she'd been the manager of the soccer club —and she still was.

If Isshiki was still showing up at her club, like I was, then she might not have been able to check her phone. It'd probably be faster to contact her in person.

"I'll go get her," I volunteered.

"O-oh, thanks," said the vice president.

With that, I left the lecture room and went alone back down the road I'd just come.

The school was only a few minutes away by bike; I'd get there in no time. I sailed along, hurrying to our school's sports field.

The field wasn't all that big, and the baseball, soccer, rugby, and track clubs were all busy practicing there, as usual.

Though the sun was going down, it was bright enough that you could still identify people. I stopped my bicycle beside the field, then headed over to where a bunch of the soccer club guys were hanging around.

Watching from afar, I saw the soccer team was divided into two groups, probably having a scrimmage. Isshiki wasn't there, and another (cute) manager girl was there with a stopwatch and whistle in her hands. She tweeted the whistle. Then the guys all relaxed and strolled over to the school building, drinking from the bottles they'd left there. It seemed they were starting a break.

Among them, I found Tobe. He noticed me, too, casually raising a hand and coming over. *Hey, cut it out. If you do something like that, I'm gonna think we're friends or something.*

"Huh? It's Hikitani-kun. What's up?" He addressed me in a super-friendly manner.

I don't know if he's just an idiot or what. Why is he being so chummy with me? I don't think he's a bad guy, so it's fine, though.

Well, this worked out well. I'd ask Tobe. "Is Isshiki here?"

"Irohasu? She's… Huh? She's not here, huh?" Tobe glanced

around, looking for Isshiki, but when he realized she wasn't there, he called out loudly to Hayama a little ways away. "Hayato, you know where Irohasu is?"

Hayama took a towel from the (cute) manager, and after using that to wipe off his sweat, he approached me and Tobe. *Whoa, manager girls actually do hand you towels! If they did something like that to me, I'd sweat even more from nerves.*

"Iroha just left. Said she had some things to do," Hayama answered Tobe.

Then Tobe looked at me. "There ya go, Hikitani."

"Oh, okay. Thanks, sorry for the trouble. See you." It seemed we'd missed each other somewhere. What a waste of time. I grabbed the handlebars of my bicycle, figuring I'd go straight back. I thanked the two guys.

"Oh, it's totally fine, no prob," Tobe said with a bright smile and a casual wave.

Beside him, Hayama still wore a cool expression. "Tobe, divide the teams for the next scrimmage."

"Huh? Oh, roger." Upon receiving that sudden instruction, Tobe trotted off to the field. It was almost like he was being shooed away.

I couldn't stay, either. I pushed my bike along, meaning to go right back to the community center.

But then someone called out to me from behind. "…Do you have a minute?"

When I turned around, Hayama was still there.

Hayama pulled off the towel hanging around his neck. Folding it lightly, he said, "Seems like it's rough going."

I didn't really understand what he was referring to. With a tilt of my head, I asked what he meant.

Inferring from my expression, Hayama smiled. "You've been doing a lot of work on the student council's request, haven't you? Thanks for helping out Iroha."

"Oh, you knew?" I'd thought for sure Isshiki hadn't said anything to Hayama about this.

He smiled wryly. "Yeah. She won't say what she's doing, but she does make it look like she's busy."

I see. So it's a complex maiden circuit thing, where she doesn't want to cause him trouble, but she wants him to know what she's doing. *I understand. Wait, no I don't.*

I also didn't understand Hayama's attitude. "If you know, then you help her out." Hayama had more of a relationship with Isshiki than I did. Isshiki had told me the reason she wouldn't rely on him, but I'd gotten the impression that if Hayama inferred she was busy, he'd at least offer to help.

But Hayama gave a thin but genuine smile and said something unexpected. "She didn't exactly look to me for help. You're the one she's counting on."

"She's just getting what she can out of me."

"Because you can never refuse when someone asks for help." He said that kindly, almost appreciatively. However, as pleasant to the ears as that remark was, it also struck me as sarcastic.

So I replied more harshly. "That's what my club does. There's no particular reason for me to refuse. And unlike you, I have nothing else to do."

"Is that all?"

"…What are you trying to say?" His question had sounded like a test, and it got on my nerves.

Hayama didn't reply, and neither did his smile fade. I felt like the calls of the guys practicing were just as loud as he was quiet, but despite that, the noise seemed far away from where Hayama and I stood.

The silence was painful, and I had to fill it. "…I mean, you don't refuse, even though it's not your club."

"I don't know…" Hayama turned his face away and looked toward the western sky.

The trailing clouds were beginning to tinge red.

Hayama pursed his lips in thought before turning back to me. Though his face was lit by the setting sun, strangely, I felt no warmth in it. "…I'm not as good a person as you think I am," he said with distaste. His eyes glared at me with penetrating cold. I couldn't say a thing.

Though he was quiet, his tone was severe. I felt as if I'd heard it before, at some point during summer vacation. Was this the look he had given me in the darkness of that night?

I didn't respond, and Hayama didn't say anything more.

Our gazes intersected, but I don't think there was any other point of contact between us. It was as if time stopped right there. Only the calls of the teams practicing continued without pause, the sole indication of the passage of time.

One of those voices called, particularly loud.

"Hayatoooo, we're starting again!" Tobe's yell made Hayama suddenly snap out of it.

"Coming!" He replied to Tobe, who was farther down the field, then raised a casual hand at me and walked away. "See you, then…"

"…Yeah, sorry for bothering you." Without watching Hayama go, I threw a leg over my bicycle. When I pushed off, I suddenly noticed my legs were tense.

Hayato's attitude rubbed me the wrong way. It was like he was poking around for my true intentions, and I was uneasy that I'd overlooked something. Both feelings lurked in the pit of my stomach, making me feel sick.

Something about his attitude didn't sit right with me.

Just what was wrong about my perception of Hayato Hayama?

I think he's a good guy. On the other hand, I also understand he's not an ordinary person. He will occasionally reveal a more callous side in the name of his goal—maintaining the friendships around him. That was who I'd thought Hayato Hayama was.

But that smile had been a little different. That mild and gentle smile had looked perfect at a glance. But the perfection of that impenetrable mask made it cold and empty, hiding whatever lay far beneath it.

I know I've seen something very much like that before.

As I pedaled my bike, searching for the answer, I arrived at the community center. I stopped my bicycle and was about to go inside when Isshiki came out of the convenience store on the other side of the street. Her head sagged as she walked, and her stride was particularly slow.

"Isshiki," I called out to her, and she looked up.

When she noticed me, with rustling convenience store bags in both her hands, she breathed a little sigh, then grinned. "Oh, sorry. Did I make you wait a little?"

"Wait? I actually went to look for you."

"Isn't that where you're supposed to say, *I wasn't waiting at all, I just got here…*?" Isshiki pouted sullenly, and without a word, I reached out to her. She looked at my hand and huffed into a smile. Almost like a tiny sigh. "…They're not particularly heavy today."

"Is that right?"

"Yep," she replied briefly. It was true the bags didn't seem all

that heavy. But her arms carrying them actually looked more burdened than usual. “We’re late, so let’s hurry,” she said. She went into the community center, and I followed.

From behind, her shoulders appeared more slumped than usual, and her back was a little hunched.

Ugh, her motivation’s drying up, huh…? She comes off as bold, but she’s surprisingly weak.

That was understandable. The event itself and the internal affairs of the student council were not going well, so she had to be fed up. It was a fairly heavy situation for a first-year.

But my own actions were one of the factors that had trapped her in this sort of environment. There wasn’t much I could do to help, but still, I would support her as best I could.

For the time being, all I could do was carry her convenience store bags, though.

X X X

If you spend more time on something, will you get more out of it?

I think that question may be an eternal challenge for people who create things.

Very often, you’ll be thinking, *I still have time, I’m still good, I think it’s almost done…* And then before you know it, it’s all fallen apart. The more time you have, the more you can slack off, get lazy, and underestimate the task. That’s how humans are. You think it’s that easy? What are you talking about?! This is just carelessness!

And right now, the situation had gotten pretty bad while we were telling ourselves, *We can still save it! We can still save it! We’ll just corporate slave it!*

As proposed by Kaihin High School previously, starting that day, some elementary school kids from a nearby school would be joining us. Despite not a single concrete decision having been made, the scale had grown.

“From here on out, let’s decide things together! I want everyone to make lots of suggestions!” Tamanawa greeted the elementary schoolers with enthusiasm and nothing else.

The kids answered back with their formal greeting in unison, fully matching the energy in his voice.

Of course, we couldn't have every kid in the school participating, so the elementary school had selected some children to come—I guess you could call them a kids' council. There were about ten of them.

And I saw a familiar face among them.

She looked a little more mature than the other kids, so I recognized her at a glance. She had long, glossy black hair and a somehow chilly air to her.

Rumi Tsurumi was alone, as she had been during summer vacation.

As I was watching her, she must have noticed me as well, because her eyes widened. But then she averted her gaze, looking at the floor instead.

There was such a difference between that gesture of hers and the excitement of the other children, it reminded me of what I'd done to her.

In Chiba Village during summer vacation, at their summer camp, I'd destroyed the relationships that surrounded Rumi Tsurumi—while pushing Hayama and his friends to act as the bad guys.

The results of that were now right in front of me.

I don't know if that was right or not. And as for whether the results helped her, only she could be the judge.

"Hey, what's wrong?"

Turning toward the voice, I saw Isshiki giving me a confused look.

"…It's nothing," I replied briefly, looking back at the kids again.

I didn't see any of the other children from that field trip group here. So that meant I didn't know what was happening in Rumi's social life now. I could mull it over all I wanted, but it would never leave the realm of speculation. So I stopped.

There were other things I should be thinking about now. Like first, how to deal with these kids. They were here, but it wasn't as if any particular role had been given to them. A teacher from their school had come with them just in case, supposedly as supervision, but it seemed they intended to leave the course of action to us big kids. After exchanging a few remarks with Tamanawa and his crowd at the beginning, the teacher immediately backed off.

And as for Tamanawa, once he had concluded his introductory

remarks, he came over to us with a cheery smile on his face. “Well then, can I count on you to handle them?”

You’re gonna invite ’em over and then dump ’em, huh…? Nothing had been decided yet, so all we could do was chitchat. What’s more, the kids couldn’t be kept there very late, so our operational hours would be limited. Frankly, it didn’t seem like there was much point in having them there.

“…Hmm…” Unsurprisingly, Isshiki’s response to Tamanawa’s request was a complicated expression.

But now that he’d approached her with this, it was too late for her to tell him we didn’t need them after all. I don’t know what Tamanawa had said when they were negotiating, but since we’d left that to Kaihin, then we would owe them. Our failure to shoot down the idea during the brainstorming was another painful point.

If we were to quarrel over this now, it would negatively affect the reputations of both our schools and the elementary school, as well as every institution that had agreed to this project. We’d already reached a deadlock, and if we were to quarrel any more, we’d be even more dead and locked.

Make one side happy, and you irritate the other… This is beyond damned if you do, damned if you don’t! It’s pamyu if you do, pamyu if you don’t! Pon pon way!

We were wondering what the heck to do here, but that was even more true for the kids. We’d brought them over, but they didn’t know what they were supposed to do, and so they’d all gathered in a clump.

All except for one.

I didn’t even have to check to know it was Rumi.

As the other kids were discussing things in a hushed manner, she did not enter their circle.

The kids glanced over at us, then started whispering in one another’s ears.

“Should we go ask what we should do?”

“Who?”

“Rock-paper-scissors?”

“Sure, but…how many rounds?”

“Wait. Are we going on ‘shoot’?”

At some point during the discussion, the kids seemed to have forgotten this was supposed to be a secret, and their voices got louder and louder until we could hear them, too.

Yeah, that's a thing, the culture of trying to decide everything via rock-paper-scissors. It's like those overcompetitive types who try to settle everything via some kind of match. And then when some loner wins, they'll be like, *Then the winner has to go do it!* Then make it majority rule to begin with! Then you'll be braced for it. Poor elementary-school me.

Well, never mind me. As I was watching, wondering about modern elementary school culture, something surprising happened.

"…I'll go," Rumi said with a glance at them—she must have been listening in from the side. She didn't seem particularly eager about it, and perhaps her calm attitude seemed imposing to the other kids. Apparently overwhelmed, the kids sent Rumi off with some timid remarks.

"Oh, okay…"

"Thanks…"

Rumi didn't really respond to their feeble send-off as she walked up to us. Unsurprisingly, she must have felt hesitant about talking to me, as she addressed the nearby vice president instead. "What should we do?"

Rumi was quite composed for her age, while the vice president was flustered instead. "U-um…" Worried about how he should answer, he looked over to me. "What should they do?"

"Don't ask me…"

"Oh, sorry." So the vice president looked over at Isshiki. Indeed, if you considered the chain of command, he should be checking with Isshiki first.

She was with Tamanawa, so I called, "Isshiki!" and summoned her over. She casually let Tamanawa know she was leaving, then trotted back to us.

"What are we gonna tell the kids to do?" I asked.

Isshiki folded her arms loosely and tilted her head. "Ummm, but nothing has been decided, huh…? I guess it'd be a good idea to check with them?"

"Uh…" With the way the Kaihin guys had been acting, I got the feeling there was no use asking. Since they'd left the kids to us, we had to think up something. "I guess something that won't get in our way, but also that needs to get done. They can do things like decorating, or like putting together a tree, right? So going out to buy materials, then making stuff, I guess…"

"…Yeah. Then, let's do that," Isshiki said with a nod. I went to

explain that to the kids, Rumi included.

This was a good enough task for the time being, but we had to think about the future, too. We didn't even know what we ourselves should be doing, and now we had even more to think about. We urgently had to solidify a structure for this event, or else we'd wind up spending this time as a disorganized crowd sitting around.

I left dealing with the kids to Isshiki and the others, and I walked over to Tamanawa. This was really something Isshiki should be doing, but compatibility is a genuine issue when it comes to interpersonal interaction. Isshiki must have felt she had to hold back because she was younger, so she couldn't assert herself with Tamanawa. So that was where I should help her out.

I approached him where he was chatting with his friends and lightly cleared my throat. Noticing my presence, he turned around. "What is it?" he asked with a bright smile.

I'm not really good at dealing with guys like him. At a glance, he gives off this "good guy" aura, and I can't help but be reminded of another guy I know. I was feeling overly conscious of this, and it made me speak somewhat awkwardly. "Well, even now that we have more people, we're not gonna get anywhere unless we decide what the event will be…"

"Then let's all consider it together." His answer came back to me almost instantaneously, leaving me speechless.

"Together…? If you're just gonna have those vague discussions, it'll never get decided. First, we have to choose what to do, then consider—"

"But then wouldn't that narrow our outlook? I think we should explore a way we can resolve things together." Tamanawa cut me off without waiting for me to finish speaking.

But if I were to back down now, we'd only get a repeat of before. So I tried again, a counterargument from a different angle. "Uh, but we don't have time…"

"That's right; we have to consider what to do about that together, too."

This discussion was like a meeting about reducing overtime hours…running late and making everyone do overtime. I scratched my head roughly, thinking about how I could phrase things to get my point across, but Tamanawa must have taken that as impatience. He put on a particularly kind smile.

"I understand you're impatient, but we'll work hard to support

one another." In a bit of a melodramatic gesture, he patted me encouragingly on the shoulder. My shoulders hadn't really been tense, but they slumped slightly.

It seemed nothing I said would work.

I'm repeating myself here, but compatibility is a genuine issue when it comes to interpersonal interaction. And in that area, the compatibility between me and Tamanawa was the worst. And it was probably not all Tamanawa's fault.

It's true that often you can create excellent results through the wisdom of the crowd, incorporating the opinions and points of view of many people. Maybe that's simply not the way I do things.

To work together with others and rely on them often means expending more time to do it. I don't have much experience with that, so I suspect I won't really understand the way Tamanawa does things.

I've made many mistakes. Maybe I was wrong this time, too.

"…Fine. But then you should have that meeting already," I said, smothering my doubts.

"So then let's get it started." Tamanawa ended his discussion with me, called out to the Kaihin students, and began the meeting.

X X X

In the meeting that day, we discussed the event in more specifics. "I think with the brainstorming we've done before, we managed to share the grand design with one another, so at this point in time, let's do a deep dive into the creative aspects of the event." From his moderator-like position, Tamanawa gave his overly long statement.

Everyone nodded in response.

The students from Soubu were also participating in the meeting, though we'd left behind one person to supervise the kids making decorations.

Would starting with a discussion of content specifics finally mean some progress with this meeting?

Confirming there was no opposition to his proposal, Tamanawa addressed the room in a calm tone. "We're starting from scratch here, so feel free to express all your ideas, everyone."

Then some ideas popped up from the Kaihin side.

“Something Christmassy would be good, right?”

“I think traditional elements will be essential.”

“But they expect something high schoolers would do, yes?”

And yet again, the discussion was tending further and further toward abstract ideas. *This is bad… At this rate, it won’t be any different from the brainstorming the other day.*

Even Tamanawa seemed to understand that, as he nodded and said to everyone, “Something that evokes Christmas and also feels like us. What sort of thing, for example?”

And then, like a word association game, ideas popped up.

“I feel like for regional events, a classical Christmas concert is fairly standard.”

“But wouldn’t it be best to include something youth-minded? A band, for example.”

“Wouldn’t jazz be more like Christmas?”

“So then a choir instead. And we borrow a pipe organ.”

The Kaihin students seemed plenty motivated and proactively made suggestions. Whenever someone put forth an idea, someone else brought up another that expanded on that possibility further.

An orchestra, a jazz concert, a choir, dance, theater, gospel, a musical, a dramatic reading, etc.…

Since my job was to make a record of the meeting, I scribbled down the ideas that came up.

This was going in a decent enough direction, almost as if the snags in the previous meetings had never happened.

Before I knew it, the Soubu student council members were also raising their hands to propose their own ideas. In the earlier sessions, the mood had made it hard for them to talk, so they hadn’t taken the initiative to speak.

I continued taking notes for a while.

We’d probably exhausted nearly every concept we could think of. When I looked over what I’d listed again, I felt like I could see hope, even if just a bit. At this rate, maybe we would decide on what we were going to do within the day.

However, a moment later, Tamanawa said something fearsome.

“Good, let’s consider all of these ideas.”

Are you kidding? Is this some kind of Chibalian joke? I thought, looking at Tamanawa, but he seemed incredibly sincere. In fact, he had a sunny smile on his face as if he were enjoying how things were going.

…By all of these ideas*, does he mean every single one that's been brought up so far? He's telling us to consider every single one to see if it's viable?*

In my opinion, we really didn't have much time. We only had just over a week until the Christmas event. Whatever we were going to do, considering we needed to devote time to training, practicing, and coordinating with the relevant parties, we had to start preparing right away.

"Wouldn't it be faster to pick one idea now?" I asked, unable to take it anymore.

Tamanawa closed his eyes and slowly shook his head. "Rather than rejecting ideas immediately, we should take in all suggestions to make something that will satisfy everyone."

"Uh, but, like…" I tried to argue, but Tamanawa would not back down.

"Some of them are systematically similar," he said, "so I think we can afford to do it together."

He was right that exploring compromises between suggestions would be one way of doing this. But was it the best way?

I was getting an awful feeling like something was out of place, a scraping at the inside of my stomach.

But before I could think of a further argument, the discussion had moved on without me.

After that, the meeting took a turn.

"How about we consolidate the musical ideas to make a Christmas concert of various genres?"

"If we're considering this from a consolidation viewpoint, then music and musicals are highly compatible."

"Why not do everything and make it into a movie?"

It seemed the Kaihin students were, as Tamanawa had proposed, exploring compromises. The majority of the discussion shifted to how to actualize all the ideas.

There's nothing wrong with bringing up suggestions. Anything that creates energy in a meeting should be welcomed. I also wasn't really against choosing the brainstorm format in order to bring out as many ideas as possible.

But with the way Tamanawa conducted these meetings, I could see no conclusion. He wouldn't reject anyone's ideas.

I'd thought this meeting was starting to come together, but the way the wind was blowing now, I was skeptical of its success.

Before I knew it, my hands had stopped recording. My arm dangled beneath the desk as I watched the meeting in silence.

Those actively discussing wore completely different expressions from me. They all had bright, lively smiles on their faces.

That was when I realized.

They were enjoying themselves right now. In fact, they were enjoying this exchange.

What they wanted was not particularly the volunteer effort in itself—they just wanted to feel good about themselves for doing this kind of work.

They didn't want to *do* work. They wanted to bask in the *feeling* of doing work. They had the impression that they were accomplishing something.

And in the end, they'd think they'd done a hard day's work, but it would all be for nothing.

Ahhh, it's exactly like a certain someone. It's like I'm having my past mistakes shoved in my face, and it really pisses me off.

You believe you've accomplished something when you haven't done squat; you don't see anything.

X X X

In the end, we took the whole meeting not to come to a conclusion, and the rest was put off until the next day.

We decided we would wrap up the meeting for now, while each of us would explore the feasibility of the ideas on our own. We'd discuss it again as a group later.

The elementary school kids had left quite a while ago. Those of us who remained got our things together and then left in turn.

Parting ways with Isshiki and the student council, I was pedaling away from the community center on my bicycle, when I suddenly realized something.

I'm hungry… Since I'd been zoning out, I'd forgotten to eat any snacks during the meeting.

If I went home, there would be dinner, but now that I was aware of my hunger, home was too far away. *I guess I could have a quick bite somewhere…* I stopped my bicycle for a moment and sent Komachi a brief text like a telegram: *Don't need dinner tonight.*

Then, calculating based on my current location and the state of my stomach, I considered the optimal meal. They say hunger is the greatest spice, but that's wrong. I think the greatest spice is when someone else pays for your meal. But, well, I was alone, so it wasn't as if anyone would pay for me. So I had to take into account the state of my own wallet, too.

So…ramen, I guess.

Once I had decided, I was quick to act.

Humming *Raa, ra, ra-ra, ra, ramen* ♪ like Nausicaa, I cheerfully raced my bicycle down the road.

Crossing an overpass, I reached Inage Station. When you pass the roundabout in front of the station, you come out into a commercial district with various restaurants, an arcade, a bowling alley, and karaoke places all in a row. Turning left at the intersection beyond that and going a bit farther, I'd arrived at my goal.

At the intersection, I waited for the light to turn from red to green.

There, I caught sight of someone unexpected.

He wore a windbreaker over a Soubu gym uniform with a fluffy scarf around his neck—it was Totsuka.

He must have noticed me, too, as he hefted up the tennis bag on his back as if it were a little heavy and waved at me. When the light turned, he looked right, then left, and ran up to me.

"Hachiman!" Totsuka puffed white breath as he called my name.

Though I was surprised by the coincidence of running into him in the middle of town, I casually raised a hand in response. "Yo."

"Yeah. Yo." Totsuka must have felt shy about making such a flippant greeting, as he raised his hand a little with a bashful smile.

Ahhh, this is so soothing…

It wasn't often I got the chance to meet Totsuka outside of school. Or rather, that's because I don't go outside much. But when something like this happens, I find myself thinking maybe magic and miracles are real.

But, well, they aren't; that's just the world we live in. Why was Totsuka here?

"What're you doing in a place like this?" I asked, and Totsuka tugged up his tennis bag and showed it to me.

"I'm on my way back from tennis classes."

Oh yeah, aside from the tennis club, Totsuka takes extracurriculars, too. Is that school close to here? …Okay, from now on, I'll make sure to be around here for no reason at all around this time. Oh, but if I run into him too often, he'll find it creepy. Maybe just once a week.

As I was drafting my weekly plans for the future, Totsuka was staring curiously at me on my bicycle. "What about you, Hachiman? Your house isn't around here, is it?"

"Oh, I wanted to get something to eat."

"Oh really?" Totsuka replied with a little *hmm* of acknowledgment, then he paused a bit in consideration. With a little tilt of his head, he looked at me with hesitant, upturned eyes. "…Can I come with you?"

"Hwa?" His unexpected remark made me freeze up, and a really dumb sound came out of my mouth.

Meanwhile, Totsuka was squeezing the scarf at his collar and twisting around uneasily as he waited for my reply.

"Y-yeah. Of course," I said.

Totsuka sighed in apparent relief, and a soft smile came to his lips. "That's great. Then what should we eat?"

"I'm fine with anything." Once the words were out of my mouth, I realized maybe that was a poor response. With a girl, you can't say you're fine with anything, huh? By the way, I hear even if the guy answers with something specific like ramen or udon, she'll give him a sour look. In other words, when a girl asks you, "What should we eat?" you have to reply with your best guess at what she wants. What the heck kind of catch-22 is this? Are girls a system for cultivating espers?

But Totsuka is a boy, so it's okay.

He blinked a couple times and then asked me, "Hachiman, you haven't decided what you'll eat?"

I was on the verge of saying, *I'm going to eat…you!* like the wolf in "Little Red Riding Hood," but there was no way I could say that, 'cause I'm a human…

"Oh, I was just kind of wandering over here, so anything is fine," I said in a particularly gentlemanly voice.

My intention had been to go for ramen, but that had been by process of elimination. When you eat alone a lot, you wind up unconsciously choosing places that have counter seats. There's nothing to worry about when it's not crowded, but using a table seat when I'm alone makes me feel bad.

Besides, I didn't have to fixate on ramen—eating with Totsuka would make anything taste delicious. I said earlier that having someone pay for your food is the best spice, but I take that back. The best spice is Totsuka. It'd be crazy if Momoya started selling something like *It's Totsuka!* It'd go beyond panic buying—it'd hit corporate buyout levels.

While we were talking about what to eat, Totsuka clapped his hands. "Ah. Then how about yakiniku?"

Hey, hey, you know what they say about a man and a woman eating yakiniku together, but what about two boys eating yakiniku together…?

As I was thinking this, Totsuka seemed to realize that wasn't so good, as he tilted his head. "Hmm, I guess yakiniku is a little expensive."

"Yeah, that's something you eat on someone else's dime."

"You're always such a character, Hachiman…" Totsuka laughed an embarrassed "Ah-ha-ha."

But yakiniku, huh…?

If you want to eat meat, I think there are other options, though…, I thought, looking around, and a certain fast food place, Fa-Kin, caught my eye. Since it was in a great location close to the station, it was a fairly popular place for kids around here. There was a hanging banner set outside the shop with the words YAKINIKU KALBI WRAP dancing on it.

"How about that?" I pointed at it, and Totsuka's eyes sparkled.

"Ohhh! Yeah, I think I'd like that!"

Upon gaining Totsuka's approval, we headed into the Fa-Kin in front of the station. But what's with the abbreviation *Fa-Kin*? It seems kind of unfortunate.

The restaurant's interior was a sharp contrast from the outside. It was warm and crowded inside, despite the cold wind blowing through the door. This had to be about the time when people returning from cram school and work would be stopping by for food.

When we lined up in front of the register, Totsuka breathed a little sigh. His cheeks were slightly red.

"They keep it pretty hot in here," he said as he brought his thin fingers to his scarf. I heard the cloth slide off, revealing a strangely captivating neck. Just looking at it made my face red.

This is strange; this is strange. Totsuka is a boy. The heating must be

making my face red right now, or it's entirely possible that I've caught a cold or something. Calm down. Calm down and compose a haiku!

So am I sick, then? / No way, of course I'm not sick! / Ah, I think I'm sick… (I'm sick.)

…Yeah, I'm sick. If you're composing a haiku about it, there's definitely something wrong.

As I lined up, feeling flustered, our turn finally came. Judging from the level of the crowds, rather than us ordering as individuals, it seemed it'd be better for us to order together.

I stood next to Totsuka, and together we took a cursory look at the menu.

Totsuka pointed to something on it—the yakiniku kalbi wrap. "Oh, Hachiman. Let's have these."

"Yeah. Okay, let's go with that."

We paid, accepted the yakiniku kalbi wrap combo dishes, then went to the second floor. Fortunately, there was a table open. I thumped myself down and decided to eat right away. First, I munched on what you could call the main item, the yakiniku kalbi wrap itself.

If you're asking if I burst out yelling, *It's so goooood!* as lights exploded from my eyes and mouth while I swam through outer space, of course it wasn't that amazing, but Totsuka's recommendation helped, and, well, it was as good as you'd expect.

And I was fine with that, but I didn't quite understand the reason Totsuka had recommended this.

"…But why yakiniku?" I asked. I'd had a number of opportunities to eat with him, and I seemed to recall he was a light eater. And I'd also gotten the feeling that, if anything, he liked vegetables more than meat, too.

Sounding a little embarrassed, Totsuka said, "I figured maybe something like that is good when you're tired…"

Oh, I see. He had exercised not long ago, so maybe he was hungry. It's like, you know, how it's best to eat protein or whatever after working out.

Or so I had interpreted it in my head, but Totsuka added quietly, "Since you've seemed tired lately, Hachiman…"

"Have I?" I was aware of my own fatigue. But that was more like worry, a mental thing. My expression said, *This is nothing.*

But Totsuka shook his head vigorously. He put his food down and timorously peered into my face. "Did something happen?" His

eyes and voice were both kind. But his gaze looked much more determined than usual, and his earnestness overwhelmed me.

Before replying, I brought my oolong tea to my lips. I felt like if I didn't, my voice would come out hoarse. "…Not really. Nothing's happened." I'd swallowed so many things, that answer came out smoother than I'd expected. My tone was more cheerful than usual, and I think I was smiling, too, to avoid making him worry.

But my smile just seemed to make him a little sad. "…Oh yeah, you don't talk about that sort of thing, huh, Hachiman?" His shoulders slumped and his head drooped, so I couldn't see the expression on his face. Still glum, he added, "Maybe Zaimokuza would know…"

"No, he's got nothing to do with anything." I was a little surprised Totsuka would pull out that random name out of nowhere.

But it was relevant to Totsuka, apparently, as he shook his head hard and lifted his face. "But you told Zaimokuza before," he said, and finally, I understood what he was talking about.

During the student council election, the one person I'd consulted, aside from Komachi, who was family, had been Zaimokuza. After that, Komachi had pulled some strings and gotten a bunch of people to help me, but the only one I'd spoken to personally was Zaimokuza. I'd never meant for that to have any kind of special meaning. He'd simply been the first one I'd seen who was also easy to talk to; he was also someone I had no reservation about getting help from.

But Totsuka must have interpreted that differently.

"I thought it was nice… I was really envious you could talk to him about that stuff, you know…" Totsuka slowly and falteringly put one word after another. When he said it that way, he made it sound like a good thing.

But it wasn't. I'm sure it's nothing so beautiful as what Totsuka was saying. I think it was self-righteous and self-interested, just relying on someone else's kindness.

Totsuka didn't know about that.

That was why he was still speaking to me so warmly.

"I don't think I'd be useful, but…"

I could see Totsuka squeezing his jacket underneath the table. His thin shoulders were trembling as if he were shivering. I didn't want to cause him any more unnecessary worry.

I hesitated a bit as to how I should talk my way out of this, scratching my head roughly as I put it into halting words. “That’s not it. It really wasn’t anything big. Isshiki just asked me to do something, and I was busy with that… And since I was basically the one who recommended her to be president, well, that was part of it. That’s all.” I summed up the brief facts to tell him and mentioned nothing else. The omission made it that much harder to say.

But it seemed even that was better than nothing, as Totsuka lifted his head. Then he looked me straight in the eye, as if trying to ascertain whether this was true or not. “Really?”

“Yeah. So you don’t need to worry about it.” If I had even a moment to think, I’d say something else. So I answered instantly.

“Okay.” He breathed a little sigh, then reached out for his coffee. Even after taking a sip, he didn’t let go of it. With the cup warming his palms, he muttered, “You really are cool, Hachiman.”

“What?”

My surprise must have been quite apparent; when Totsuka saw my face, he was startled, too. “I—I don’t mean it in a weird way!” He waved his hands frantically. Face bright red and fiddling with his hair, he added, “Ummm, I’m not quite sure how I should say it, but…you don’t ever complain, and you work hard on your own, even when things are painful or tough. I think…it’s just…cool…”

His explanation made me even more embarrassed. I pretended to lean my face on my hand and looked away. Reflexively, my manner of speech became curt. “…Not really. I complain, and I whine a hell of a lot, too.”

“Ah-ha-ha, maybe that’s true.” Totsuka suddenly burst into smiles. And then, his expression still kind, he hesitantly murmured, “…But if you’re in trouble, tell me, ’kay?” He added that question at the end like a reminder, and I nodded wordlessly in response. The seriousness of his tone reminded me I shouldn’t speak so casually. All the more so if Totsuka thought trust and cooperation were beautiful things.

When I agreed, Totsuka nodded back at me.

There was a strange silence then. Totsuka looked down, a little shyly.

The air between us felt more relaxed than before. “Wanna eat something sweet?” I asked casually.

“Oh yeah. Dessert,” Totsuka agreed, head jerking up.

“I’ll go buy whatever. You wait here.” The moment that was out

of my mouth, I stood up without waiting for his reply.

When I went down to the first floor, the register was crowded like before. I was going to have to wait awhile.

Perhaps because there were so many people coming in and out of the restaurant, the area next to the register was a little warm. I started worrying I would zone out, so I decided to go outside for a bit.

The December night was cold, but the chilly outside air felt good on my cheeks. I'd come outside without putting on my coat or scarf, and the dry wind sneaked down my collar. I huddled into myself.

As I was trembling alone on the nighttime street corner, one of the passersby gave me a funny look. Most of the other people didn't pay attention to me.

Suddenly, what Totsuka had just said rose in my mind.

Cool, huh…?

He was wrong about me. I was probably being stubborn. I think I was just trying to look good.

What he said was "cool" was nothing more than a form of obstinacy, an attempt not to betray the version of myself I'd decided I should be.

Even now, a repulsive monster of reason and self-consciousness haunts this body.

Maybe I should have simply taken what Totsuka said positively rather than focus so hard on it.

However, Yuigahama's forced happy face, Isshiki's occasionally revealed glum expressions, Rumi Tsurumi's isolation, and most of all, Yukinoshita's quiet, resigned smiles asked me repeatedly:

Was that really right?

I sighed, looking up at the starless night sky. Illuminated by the lights of the city, the part of the sky I could see was covered with clouds.

5

Shizuka Hiratsuka wishes them a good future.

The raindrops slid down the glass. The rain hadn't stopped since morning, and it was still falling now in a cold drizzle.

I'd brought up Komachi's entrance exams the other day when it was time for me to go, so maybe that was why Yukinoshita didn't question me as I left the clubroom.

Someone must have left open a window, because the empty hallway floor was damp. I could hear the squeaking of my indoor shoes with every step.

There was one week left until Christmas.

Snow rarely falls in December in Chiba. I didn't have to worry about a white Christmas. What I had to worry about was the black company I was heading off to now.

After leaving the school building, I headed straight for the community center.

Since it had been raining when I'd left home in the morning, I had commuted to school by train, transferring to the bus after that. In a warmer season, I would have taken my bicycle, even if it meant getting a little wet, but of course I didn't want to get soaked in winter.

The barren trees made the path by the park feel quite a bit chillier.

Normally, it would have been a while longer before sunset, but the weather that day meant the sunlight was already fading.

Against this somber backdrop, the umbrella of the person walking in front of me was bright and colorful. It was a plastic one, decorated with an appealing flower design.

The owner of the umbrella was spinning it around as she

walked, probably staving off boredom. Occasionally, golden hair would peek out from underneath.

From my view of her hair and back, it looked like that person was Isshiki.

She walked at a leisurely pace, so I caught up to her right away. When I came up beside her, she noticed me, tilting her umbrella to get a look at my face. “Oh, hi.”

“Hey.” I lightly raised my umbrella in reply. “You gonna buy snacks today?”

“No. It doesn’t look like there’s going to be a meeting today.”

“Oh, that’s right.”

As Isshiki said, there would be no meeting that day. The time had been allotted to a thorough examination of the ideas that had come up the day before, to consider whether they were realistic, as well as to come up with some compromise proposals. So that meant no need for food shopping. And inevitably, I wouldn’t be carrying that bag of snacks.

As I was pondering this, Isshiki peeked under my umbrella and gave me a wicked smile. “…Heh-heh-heh, too bad. You can’t try to earn points with me that way.”

“I know that’s not enough to earn anything.”

As we were having this stupid conversation, a somewhat large, inelegant, and plain plastic umbrella came over with a hurried pitter-patter. The hem of a skirt from Kaihin fluttered restlessly underneath it.

“Huh? It’s Isshiki-chan and Hikigaya.” The one calling out to us with her umbrella raised high was Orimoto.

“Hello!”

“Heya. Geez, I was just chatting with some friends, and I wound up running late.” As usual, Orimoto was acting familiar. She came right up by Isshiki’s side immediately, and they started a friendly chat. Of course, Isshiki never revealed any displeasure toward Orimoto’s behavior. She wore a beaming and affable smile as she accommodated her.

Watching from the side, I walked through the rain.

When it seemed they’d run out of things to talk about, Isshiki seemed to suddenly remember something. “That reminds me—you two knew each other before, right?”

“Yeah, yeah, we went to the same middle school,” Orimoto replied.

Isshiki glanced at us. “So even he had friends, huh?”

Could you not react like that? It makes me uncomfortable.

It seemed Orimoto felt the same way, though, and she looked like she didn’t quite know how to reply. “Friends? Well, hmm…sort of, I guess.”

Isshiki must have sensed something off about Orimoto’s vague reply, and she pounced, eyes sparkling. “What, what?! That’s a meaningful-sounding way to say it.”

Orimoto made an *oh nooo* face and looked at me.

But she really had no choice but to reply. Orimoto and I had never exactly been friends, so it made sense for her to answer vaguely.

But Isshiki wouldn’t overlook this opportunity. With a grin, she tug-tugged at my sleeve. “Heeey, come on, what’s up?”

Stop it, don’t tug it, our hands touched a little and, like, it was soft, and I don’t want to keep thinking about it, so don’t!

I bet it was a strategy for the sake of rattling me. I was weakened by Isshiki’s persistent, pestering attack, and in the process of avoiding her hand, I let it slip. “Well, stuff happened, a long time ago…”

“Stuff…” Isshiki repeated that word, and this time, she turned to Orimoto.

Pressed for a reply, Orimoto got stuck. “Uhhh,” she said, then covered it with a laugh. “Ah-ha-ha, well, it was a long time ago.” Her answer was a little surprising. I’d thought for sure Orimoto thought of my confession as a good story for getting a laugh, but she looked away from Isshiki and avoided giving her a straight answer.

I wouldn't go so far as to say I wouldn't mind if they talked about our past, but I'd expected it as an inevitable outcome, so Orimoto's change there was a bit curious to me.

Isshiki still wanted to ask questions, but Orimoto sensed that and spun around to me instead, changing the subject suddenly. "Anyway, Hayama isn't coming to this thing, is he?"

Isshiki twitched at the name *Hayama*. She'd been grinning and having a good time, but now her smile froze. "…Do you know Hayama, too?"

Her voice was pitched a little low. Scary. Her eyes were smiling, and her mouth was giggling, but I think she was squinting up her eyes on purpose to hide the gravity behind them…

"We hung out a bit before," Orimoto said.

"Ohhh, so you hung out…" Isshiki pounced on those words, shooting Orimoto a dark look.

Not good. This is going to turn into a hassle.

"I'm sure he's busy with his club, so he can't come," I cut into their conversation, and Orimoto tilted her umbrella and looked at me.

"It seems like you get along well with him," commented Orimoto, "so I was just wondering if he might show up later on."

"We're not friends. If he did, it'd just be awkward."

"Oh? But we're kind of in trouble, aren't we? The student council started up in the fall, and they're not used to things. So I thought you might call him in to help or something."

I see; so Kaihin—or Orimoto, at least—is aware of the trouble. She had appeared to be agreeing unconditionally with the current state of affairs, but it seemed she had her own problems with it.

"It's true that things aren't good, but I'm not calling Hayama."

"Hmm… Well, it'd be pretty awkward if we did see him, though," she murmured. She'd felt that awkwardness personally.

It was true, considering what had happened right before we'd parted ways with Hayama and the others when we'd gone to hang out downtown. It would be hard to face him again. I didn't really want to go out of my way to find him myself, either.

Orimoto had probably brought him up just now to prevent him from showing up later, since it'd be awkward if they did meet. Or maybe she was just making sure he wouldn't be coming. I could

understand that.

But Isshiki seemed thoughtful as she glanced over at our faces. Well, if she didn't remember Orimoto, then I didn't have to tell her. She probably wasn't interested in other girls…

After we'd exhausted the conversation about Hayama, the one common topic among the three of us, we walked in silence for a while.

We were nearly at the community center entrance when Orimoto gave an "Ahhh" to indicate she wanted to say something. I glanced over at her, wondering what it was, and found she was staring at me. "…I also thought those girls you're friends with might come, Hikigaya."

"No…they're not coming."

I wasn't going to call them. I couldn't.

"Hmm…" Orimoto expressed her disinterest, then kicked up a splash from a puddle before tilting up her umbrella to look up at the sky. I followed her gaze. In the west, the sunset was just barely peeking out. Maybe the rain might stop soon.

But the sky was still dark.

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A little while after we went into the community center, I happened to look up at the clock.

Another day of time passing, nothing more.

I closed my borrowed laptop with a click and pressed my fingers to my eyes. The task of surveying the ideas that had come up in the meeting the day before was tougher than I'd thought.

The more time passed, the fewer options we had.

We didn't have enough time, people, or money. Put together those three excuses, and they make some fine rationale. With these as your reasons, you can give up or give in on anything.

Of course, if we could postpone the plans or suspend them, we wouldn't be so limited, but we were already past the point of backing out.

We kept getting more people involved with this project, while the key elements were yet to be decided. To put it in anime terms: It's like you've only come up with a production committee, while

the actual anime hasn't been done. An anime like that is never gonna go well…

And plus, while we were doing this, time would keep marching on, and the days on the calendar would keep flipping by. It sounded nice to say we were putting time and effort into it, but we were really just killing the time we had to do the work. In anime terms, it's like putting all the time into planning meetings, while all the other important stuff is a mess… Something like that.

What was important was balance and making decisions. Right now, both of those were lacking.

After that short pause, I faced the laptop once more.

I calculated the budget, confirmed the schedule, and weighed the potential costs of the more realistic plans. Just in case, I also looked up the contact info for churches and jazz bands and stuff.

But the more I engaged in these tasks, the more overwhelming the feeling became that this event would never happen. *This is just, eugh, this is, like, so dumb! This is, like, so totally impossible!* I complained under my breath. The others from Soubu must have felt the same way, as the vice president sighed.

Then he came over to show me some papers. "Here. Run the numbers any way you want, but there's not enough money. So what do we do?"

"Either we do less stuff, or we raise some money. We've got no choice but to take a vote about it at the next meeting, right?" Frankly, we didn't even have time for that. But in order to make them give this up, we had to have some proper grounds for argument and some documentation, or it'd never work out. We still might be overruled anyway.

I scratched hard at my head and reached out for a paper cup of coffee. The black liquid was so aggressively bitter and acrid, I couldn't find it good. *Isn't there anything sweet…?* I wondered, searching around the tabletops.

That was when my eyes landed on Isshiki, and she drifted over. "We're about to finish making the decorations. What should we do next?"

Oh, that reminds me—our job was to deal with the elementary school kids… I paused the task at hand, folded my arms, and considered for a while.

Something that would be necessary, regardless of our eventual decisions, and also something that even elementary school kids

could do. They were almost done making the decorations for the venue. They'd need something else to do…

I suddenly struck on an idea.

"How about setting up the tree?" I said.

But Isshiki's face said she wasn't on board. "The tree's been delivered, but…if we set it up now, wouldn't it get in the way?"

Well, I'd figured she'd say that. If we set it up and left it bam in the middle of the room, it *would* be annoying as hell. The Christmas tree we'd gotten this time around was pretty big and had an unusual sense of presence. So then we had to make use of its inconveniently large presence.

"Let's negotiate with the community center and ask them to let us put it at the entrance. It's a week before Christmas, so that should work out perfectly. Then we just have to carry it into the venue on the day of."

"I see… Understood!" Isshiki gave me a couple nods, then trotted off to the kids. I watched her go, then turned my eyes to the computer again. In the end, I hadn't found any snacks, but that exchange with Isshiki had been a good break.

But man, using work as a change of pace from your other work is like a terminal symptom, right? Our complacence as corporate slaves reflects the lies, gives us "freedom" before we die of overwork…

But I couldn't be joking around about this. Helping Isshiki was supposed to be my way of accepting the consequences of making her president, but I'd accidentally started telling her how to do her job.

This was clearly different from support or backup. And nobody was questioning it. They were completely naturally starting to come to me for confirmation.

This was an awful way to go about this. And I'd witnessed a bad situation like this before. I had to change this, or eventually, it would all fall apart. I knew that from experience. Most of all, if I considered Iroha Isshiki's future as student council president, this state of affairs was not at all desirable.

With the goal of changing things quickly so I could leave the rest to Isshiki, I went to go negotiate.

I went to Tamanawa with some papers gathered in my hands; we couldn't have the usual style of meeting. Two representatives had to make a decision in conference, or he would weasel out of

this.

"Hey, do you have a minute?"

"What is it?" It looked like Tamanawa was working on some task alone. The characters of a plan outline danced on the screen of a MacBook Air. When I took a peek at it, I saw he was writing about things like how to synergize multiple ideas.

Apparently, he was still trying to make everyone's ideas happen.

After seeing a plan draft like that, it was a little hard to say what I had to, but regardless, I shoved the papers in my hands at him. "We've looked into all the various ideas. The ones that seem achievable, and the ones that don't… Well, most of them don't, but…"

"Oh! Thank you!" Tamanawa accepted the documents from me and flipped through them. "We've made the problematic areas clear now, yes?"

"Yeah."

Those went without saying: We didn't have enough time or money.

"So then let's all consider together how to resolve them."

"No, hold on. That really is impossible. We only have one week."

"Yeah, for bands and such, we should hire externally, I suppose. You know, I looked into it a bit, and I found quite a few services that do private concerts for hire. I think it would be great if we could work in something like that to make our own sort of event."

Where's the money for that coming from…? I nearly asked, but that probably wouldn't be effective on someone who was fixated on his own ideas.

It wasn't that Tamanawa wouldn't listen to people. He would listen—to everyone.

This was exactly why he was trying to derive a conclusion that took every single idea into consideration.

"First, let's consider it all together and decide at the next meeting."

His will was firm. It kind of looked like he was doubling down. Even after speaking with him countless times, he still would not retreat from this position. Perhaps rather than stubbornness, I should call this an obsession—no, a delusion. It was incomprehensible to me why he would go this far in an attempt to

make use of every idea.

But that was when I figured it out.

It hadn't been that long since Tamanawa had become student council president, either. He had an assertive personality, so I'd gotten the wrong idea, but he would have become president recently, just like Isshiki.

That was why he sought ideas from others and listened to them. And then after making sure they agreed, he would move into action. He coordinated to avoid any problems now and any quarrels down the line.

The psychology had to be similar to the way Isshiki would look to me for instructions. I knew Isshiki fairly well and could hardly help her, so there was no way I could support Tamanawa when I barely knew him—and trying to change his mind would be even more of a wasted effort.

I couldn't ask for too much. I decided to remind him of one thing: Next time, for sure, we would make some real decisions. "… We absolutely have to make a decision at the next meeting, or we won't have enough time to do the work. So please make sure that gets done."

"Of course," Tamanawa replied, his expression still bright. But now, his grin looked rather fishy to me, too.

I gave up trying to win over Tamanawa and decided to return to my spot.

This is bad… There's nothing else I can do.

Ultimately, the final decision on what we were doing would take place at the next meeting—if we even came to one. Judging from the progress in the meetings thus far, I wouldn't count on it.

Whatever the case, there was nothing else I could do at this stage. Now all I could do was twiddle my thumbs and watch this event fall apart.

I was mulling this over on my way to my seat when I discovered Rumi all alone, working on her task.

I looked around but saw no other little kids nearby. I recalled they were supposed to be setting up the tree or decorating it. Curious about what Rumi was doing alone, I approached her. "… Making decorations?"

Rumi was taking a pair of scissors to folded paper, cutting along the lines drawn there. It looked like she was making some kind of snowflake decoration.

I inferred that the task of making decorations wasn't quite over, and Rumi was doing the leftover bits. Well, the way the kids saw it, they must have preferred to do something new, like put together a tree, rather than making more of the same.

But I dunno about letting an elementary schooler use a sharp object without any supervision. Should I say something to her? Besides, no one else was watching, so there wouldn't be anyone to give me weird looks for talking to her.

"Working by yourself?" I asked as I crouched down a little, but she didn't reply. She continued to silently cut the folded paper with her scissors.

Well, if she's ignoring me, I guess there's nothing I can do about that.

I got up, figuring I'd just leave, when Rumi glanced at me. Then she picked up a new piece of paper and turned away again. "…Isn't it obvious?" she replied in a cheeky, disparaging tone.

Just how much of a time lag is there, here? Even satellite broadcast is a little faster, at least these days. She's not cute at all, I thought, but seeing her working like that, even when she was alone, I couldn't be too mad. At the same time, I realized what had brought about this situation.

Rumi Tsurumi's current state of affairs was another result of my actions. So I should be taking responsibility for that, too.

I thumped down next to Rumi and picked up a piece from the stack of folded paper. I borrowed one of the pairs of scissors lying around.

Ummm…ahhh, there's a snowflake diagram drawn on the origami paper, and you cut along the lines… No, that's not it. So do you fold it and then cut it to make the shape? Thinking about how they were doing some surprisingly sophisticated stuff, I copied the way she folded the paper, then cut it with the scissors.

That was when I heard the snipping sounds that had been going on beside me stop. I glanced over to see Rumi's hands were still, and she was looking at me in surprise. "…What're you doing?" she asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" I repeated back what she'd said to me not long ago.

Rumi seemed to get that, and she gave me a little glare and a sulky look. "…So you don't have anything else to do?"

"Guess not," I said.

The truth was there were probably a number of things I should've been doing, but I could do none of them right now. For the rest, we had to actually have a meeting, or nothing was going to work out.

Rumi gave me a dull look. "…Lazy."

"Leave me alone."

After that, the two of us silently resumed making the remaining decorations.

I don't know who'd come up with the idea, but the folded paper ornaments were far more intricate than I'd imagined, and cutting out the tiny pieces with scissors required a surprising amount of concentration. I became completely absorbed in it, and the bustle of the lecture room seemed to drift away.

But then there was the noisy patter of approaching footsteps. I looked up to see Isshiki had trotted over.

"Oh, I'm gonna borrow that box cutter." She casually asked for permission, then reached out to one of the box cutters on top of the table. She probably needed the tool for decorating the tree.

Then she noticed Rumi, who was too absorbed in her task to notice Isshiki in return. But Isshiki seemed curious about something.

She beckoned me over with little hand gestures. I leaned toward her as if to ask, *What is it?*

She whispered into my ear, "…Do you like younger girls?"

"I don't dislike them." I have a little sister, so maybe that's why I don't really feel all that awkward around kids of that age. In fact, I get far more anxious when they're around my age. On the other hand, I don't really know how to deal with kids as young as Kawasaki's sister. I can be a little awkward around them, but I guess that's it. Oh, I do have a basic dislike of younger boys, though. I mean, they're such animals, they can't even understand verbal communication…

I'd answered her, but Isshiki gave me no reply. When I eyed her, wondering if it was just a corpse, she gave me a confused look.

"…Wait, wereyoutryingtohitonmeI'msorryIlikeolderguysquiteabitbutit'snothappening."

"Uh, I'm clearly not." *Honestly, I feel like an idiot for replying seriously to her questions…*

When I tried to shoo her out of my way, Isshiki whined, "Hey, why're you treating me like that…?" as she left the lecture room.

Once she was gone, the time passed in silence once more.

There were only the sounds of rustling paper and scissors snipping away. Neither of us opened our mouths, and there was nothing but snowflakes made of folded paper falling into piles. Eventually, we finished the last one, and Rumi and I looked at each other.

"Guess we're done…"

"…Yeah," she answered, and then with a satisfied-sounding sigh, she smiled a little. But when her eyes met mine, she shyly jerked her face away again immediately.

I breathed a short sigh and stood. "…Right, I guess I'll go now."

"U-um…" Still sitting, Rumi looked at me as if she wanted to say something.

But I didn't wait for her. "I bet they're still working on the tree, so why don't you go?"

"…Oh yeah," Rumi replied, and then she stood and headed out of the lecture room. I returned to my old seat.

I couldn't listen to what Rumi had been about to say. Seeing that smile had hurt.

It had made me realize I was trying to buy forgiveness with my petty attempt to help her. But Rumi Tsurumi's smile was not something that would affirm my actions.

Some things had been saved through my old methods.

But I'm sure that's not enough.

My responsibility. I still don't know what the answer is.

X X X

We sent the elementary schoolers home, and then after working a while longer, once I was finished organizing the remaining documents, there was no longer anything else to do.

It seemed the members of the Soubu student council were also at loose ends, killing time with tasks like double-checking and recalculating the budget. The Kaihin kids seemed to be having some kind of vibrant discussion.

And as for my work, I guess that's it for today.

"Isshiki, it doesn't look like there's anything else to do, so can we leave?" I asked her as she was flipping through a stack of papers beside me.

She looked up at the clock, too, and after a moment of consideration, she opened her mouth. “Yeah…let’s call it a day.”

“Okay. Then I’ll see you.”

Isshiki gave me a thank-you, and with that, I left the lecture room.

When I exited the community center, I found the rain had already stopped. The streetlights were reflected in the puddle, and the water drops under the eaves were absorbing light. But as beautiful as it was, the sight was somehow chilly.

As I pulled the collar of my jacket together, my feet started off to the bicycle parking, when I realized I hadn’t ridden my bicycle there that day. Since it had been raining that morning, I’d taken the train, then transferred to the bus.

As I was walking to the station, I noticed the Maripin. The signs were brightly lit, and when the automatic doors opened, a warm air flowed out from inside the building.

That reminds me—there’s a KFC inside the Maripin, too… I’d completely forgotten to reserve our order.

I was earlier than usual, so I figured I’d reserve the tub my mom had asked me for. It was a little far from home, but we could just reheat it in the toaster oven anyway. I’d be the one coming to get it, so this place should be fine. Anyway, coming to get the chicken is a perfect role for myself, the chicken!

I headed into the Marinpia, and people carrying large bags caught my eye—they had to have Christmas sales going on. Casually looking around the mall, I saw where the KFC was and headed straight for it.

With Christmas looming in one week, this time period was peak season for KFC, and there were a few people lining up who looked like they were reserving tubs. Well, it was a perfect place to stop by on your way home from work. It was close to the station, after all. I joined the line and completed my reservation without a hitch.

I’d finished my task. Now to head home.

I started walking to the exit closest to the KFC. The constant flow of people entering and exiting kept the automatic doors open all the time, and it wasn’t just shoppers from the first floor. People heading toward the nearby escalator as well as those coming down off it were all mixed together, making it rather crowded.

About what you’d expect from the year-end holiday season. It’s all hustle and bustle in here…, I thought as I looked over at the

escalator.

And then, in the flow of people coming off that escalator, I found Yukinoshita. I should have walked out right then, but I was startled, and my feet stopped.

Even in the throng of people, Yukinoshita stood out prominently. I hadn't been searching for her, but she'd immediately caught my eye. She must have been shopping for books, as she had a bag from a bookstore in hand.

She was walking my way. Of course, she noticed me with a little start. Our eyes met, and we acknowledged each other. It would be difficult to pretend we hadn't seen each other now.

I bowed casually with just a bob of my head, and Yukinoshita, coming off the escalator and heading for the exit right then, nodded back.

"Hey," I said.

"…Good evening."

I'd been standing there for a bit, while Yukinoshita had just come walking briskly off the escalator. Our paces synced, and we stepped outside at almost the same moment.

The main road was crowded with people heading home and shoppers coming and going.

Beyond the exit by the KFC was a small square. Maybe it'd be different at warmer times of year, or at noon on weekends, but on a cold night after the rain, people didn't stop there.

But for some reason or another, we did.

Yukinoshita put on her coat again and adjusted her collar to check her scarf. To fill the time, I rewrapped my own scarf, too.

Maybe this was a habit from the clubroom lately. I should've left things at that, but I still opened my mouth automatically, looking for some words. "Uhhh, shopping?" I asked.

With the same unchanging expression as always, she coldly replied, “Yes… What are you doing out this late?”

I’d left the club early again that day. So it was odd for me to be there. Of course she’d ask me. I should have avoided running into her here—but I hadn’t, and there was no helping it now.

Scratching my cheek, I looked away. “…I’ve got, well, lots of stuff going on.”

I couldn’t tell her the truth, so I gave a bland reply that was meaningless and vague and also technically wasn’t a lie.

Yukinoshita’s eyes slid downward, and she assented in a quiet voice. “I see…” Then she lifted her chin. Her teeth bit down on the tiny tremble in her lip, as if she was worrying whether to speak or not, and her gaze wavered slightly. “…You’re helping Isshiki with her business, aren’t you?” Her voice was a quiet and listless whisper. Her words were like frost falling in the night, terribly cold and fragile enough to shatter under a touch.

Yuigahama probably hadn’t told her. I think she’d figured it out herself. She’d tolerated it silently thus far, but now that she’d actually witnessed this suspicious behavior from me, she couldn’t avoid asking.

“Oh, well, things just worked out that way…” The facts wouldn’t change, no matter how evasive I was about it, but still, I had no other way to say it. Even though there was no point in denying it now.

“You didn’t have to bother lying.” Yukinoshita’s eyes were down on the bare earth lashed by the cold winter wind. She was probably referring to my excuses, like that thing about Komachi.

“I didn’t lie. That was one of my reasons.”

“…Yes, I suppose it’s true that wasn’t a lie,” Yukinoshita said as if she were laughing at herself. Her hand combed through her hair, mussed by the cold wind.

That gesture reminded me of a similar exchange between us sometime before.

I’d stubbornly believed in the fact that Yukino Yukinoshita does not lie, and that was why I’d been disillusioned when she hadn’t spoken the truth.

Not by her. I’d disappointed myself with how I’d forced such ideals on her.

So what about me now? I was even worse than before. I'd swallowed the disingenuous idea that it's not a lie if you avoid saying the truth, and now I was even acting on it.

I was nonchalantly making use of the deception that I'd once rejected so fiercely, and I felt like a disgrace for it. That was why the words that came out of my mouth were kind of like a confession.

"…Sorry for doing this without talking to you."

Yukinoshita closed her eyes and shook her head. "I don't really mind. I can't control what you do in your own time, and I don't have the right, too, either. Or…" She paused there. Her hand holding the bag over her shoulder squeezed tight. "Do you need my permission?" she asked me with tranquil eyes, tilting her head ever so slightly. Her soft voice was not hostile. That was what made it hurt so much. I felt a pressure in my chest like a silk cord slowly strangling me.

"…No, I was just checking," I said, a little harshly. I didn't know if that was the right answer. Maybe there was no such thing as a right one in the first place.

I subtly shifted my gaze to catch a glimpse of her. She wore that same faint smile she'd had on in the clubroom, as if nostalgic for days long past.

"…I see. Then there's no need for you to apologize, is there? Besides, Isshiki can engage more readily and openly if it's with you." Yukinoshita spoke eloquently and slowly, without ever rushing.

I listened in silence. If an apology wasn't allowed, then what else could I say?

She didn't look at me, gazing only at the cloudy, starless sky and the mist-like clouds, muddied with orange from the light of the factory district on the distant bay coast. "I think you can resolve things on your own," she continued. "You've always done that, after all."

I didn't think that was true. I hadn't resolved anything. With Isshiki and Rumi, I'd ultimately just made it a mess instead. Had I managed to help them? Not at all. "I haven't really resolved anything… And besides, I'm just doing it on my own because I'm on my own."

I deal with my issues by myself. That's simply how things are. Whether I got dragged into something or it fell down into my lap,

once I'm involved, it's my problem. So I was dealing with it alone.

It's so ingrained in me, and I don't really know any other ways to do it, yet I still rely on others so easily. That leads to nothing good. Obviously, when someone who's starting from the wrong place tries to do things the right way, he's not going to get the right results.

That's why I do things myself. That's all it is.

And Yukinoshita, who'd done these club activities together with me for over six months, had to be the same, too.

"You're the same way, aren't you?" I asked with certainty—no, with expectation.

But Yukinoshita hesitated to speak. "I'm…not." She lowered her eyes, her lips pulled down, and she was squeezing the sleeves of her coat. Beneath her loose scarf, I caught a glimpse of motion in her white neck as she swallowed. It looked as if she was gasping painfully in the wind. It may have been the first time I'd seen Yukinoshita like that. Her head still downturned, she seemed to struggle getting the words out. "That's just acting like someone who has it all together…like someone who's figured everything out."

Who was she talking about? Did she mean her, or did she mean me? But I figured it had to be the same thing. Who had it been, really, who'd thought they had everything figured out?

That was why I felt I had to say something, even though I hadn't gathered my thoughts, and opened my mouth. "Hey, Yukinoshita…," I started to say, but I couldn't continue.

She jerked her head up, cutting me off in her usual calm tones. "Why don't you take some time away from the club? If you're just trying to be considerate, there's no need for you to stop by." She spoke quickly but maintained her clear, faint smile. Her expression was peaceful, like a delicate porcelain doll in a glass case.

"I'm not trying to be considerate." I knew these weren't the words I should be saying. But I also understood if I said nothing, I would lose even that hollow room.

But that mistake remained a mistake, and no matter what I said to try to cover it, it wouldn't be corrected.

Yukinoshita shook her head. The bag over her shoulder lowered weakly. "I have. I've been trying to be considerate…ever since then… So…" I strained to catch the near whisper as I waited for what she would say next. But the rest never came, and she said something else. "But there's no more need to force it. If this was

enough to ruin it, then that's all it amounted to… Am I wrong?"

That question silenced me.

That was something I'd both believed and failed to believe completely.

But on that field trip, Yukinoshita had believed in what I'd been unable to.

I'd told one lie then. With that, I'd twisted that wish to not change things, to not be changed.

Ebina, Miura, and Hayama.

They had wanted their happy lifestyle to continue as it had been. Their relationship was enough to make them want to lie and deceive bit by bit to maintain it. Having understood that, I couldn't reject the idea so easily.

I couldn't feel like their conclusion and the choice they had made in an attempt to protect it was wrong.

I had projected myself onto them and approved of how they were. I'd rather liked how things had been, in my own way, and I'd started to realize I didn't want to let it go.

Even though I knew I was going to lose it eventually.

That was why I twisted my conviction and lied to myself. The important things can't be replaced. If you lose it, you'll never get it again. So you lie like that because you feel you have to protect it.

I hadn't been protecting it—I'd thought I had, but really, I was only clinging to it.

The question Yukinoshita had put before me now was an ultimatum.

Not finding meaning in the superficial—that was the one conviction we had shared.

—Do I still have that conviction now?

I couldn't answer. Now, I know it's not completely pointless to maintain a pleasant veneer. I understand that's one way you can do things. That was why I couldn't reject it.

I was unable to say anything as Yukinoshita looked at me with sadness in her eyes. It seemed she was silently waiting for my answer. But when she understood my answer was my silence, a small breath slipped from her, and she offered a fragile smile. "You don't have to force yourself to come anymore…"

Her tone was terribly kind.

Her loafers tapped against the brick stairs. Despite the crowd around her, I felt as if I could hear the sound of her departing

footsteps the whole way.

She disappeared into the crowd at the station. Though she wasn't that far away, she felt unreachable to me.

I watched her go without calling out to her and sat down right there on the steps of the square.

At some point, Christmas songs started playing from a nearby store. The lights lit on the Christmas tree in the square, decorated with present-shaped ornaments.

Were those boxes empty on the inside?

They would be exactly like that clubroom. But hollow as that box was, I'd still tried to hold on to it.

I never thought I'd want something like that.

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I stared off into space. Nothing in particular was on my mind.

I sat on the stairs of the square for a while, watching the lights on the tree flash over and over.

As I was soaking in the cold, finally, I made my decision. Blowing out a white breath, I got to my feet.

Not much time had passed since Yukinoshita had left, according to the clock.

In front of the station, there were lots of people going home, shoppers, and students returning from their clubs.

But despite the noise, it felt strangely quiet.

Even once I'd left the square and stepped into the crowds, I didn't really hear the voices around me or the Christmas carols. Just my own sigh, which sounded particularly loud in my ears.

I made my way down the sidewalk slowly. Maybe it was the flow of people going the opposite direction, exiting the station, that kept me from moving at the pace I wanted.

It wasn't just the people. The cars on the road beside me often stopped. They had to be picking people up at the station or people coming in and out of the nearby parking lot.

One of those cars blared its horn. *Don't honk in the middle of town…* I shot it a glare. A few other people glanced over, too.

That was where I saw the sort of black sports car you don't see much around here, the kind that looks elongated in the front. The

car slowly pulled alongside me, and the window on the left side slid down.

"Hikigaya, what're you doing out here?" Poking her head out the window was Miss Hiratsuka.

"Uh, well, I was about to head home, but…what are you doing here, Miss Hiratsuka?" I asked. I wasn't expecting to run into her at all, much less here.

A smile came to her lips. "Come on, it's just a week till the event, right? I went to check on you, but it turns out you were done for the day. I was about to head home when I found you."

"You've got sharp eyes."

"When they make you work as a guidance counselor, you find yourself catching the school uniform all over town." She smiled in a bit of a self-deprecating way and beckoned me over to the passenger's seat. "This is perfect. I'll take you home."

"Uh, no, I'm fine."

"Just come on. Get in. Cars are coming up behind me," she urged me. I looked over to see a car rolling in after her. If she was going to say that, then I had to get in—now.

I was about to reluctantly climb in but found there was only one door on the left side. *I guess this is one of those two-seaters.* So I was forced to circle around to the right side. *Wait, so the steering wheel in this car is on the left…?*

I opened the door and slid inside. As I was putting on the seat belt, I looked around the interior to see the seats and dashboard were high-quality leather, and the meters and controls sparkled with a metallic aluminum finish. *What the heck? Cool.* "I didn't know you had a car like this, Miss Hiratsuka. I feel like this one's different from that one during summer vacation." I thought when she took us to Chiba Village, she'd driven a typical minivan…

"Oh, that was a rental car. This is my baby," Miss Hiratsuka said, knocking the wheel with her fist, pleased. Bold and proud, huh. *But a single woman with an expensive-looking two-seater sports car, huh…? I dunno, maybe her heavy tendency toward these kinds of hobbies is one of the reasons she can't get married…*

Miss Hiratsuka's baby revved with a low growl and sped away.

I told her the general location of my house, and she nodded, turning the wheel. From there, it would be fastest to go along the national highway.

But when I looked into the area lit by the headlights, she wasn't

going to the highway.

Finding this strange, I looked over to the driver's seat to see her puffing a cigarette between her lips, eyes on the road. "Mind if we take a little detour?"

"Sure." Since she was taking me home, of course I couldn't complain. I didn't know where the detour would lead, but if we were going to my house in the end, I didn't mind.

I leaned back in the seat and rested my chin on my hand, elbow on the window frame. It had to be a little foggy, because the streetlights I saw from the car oozed orange as they flowed by.

A warm wind slowly blew up from my feet. It was comfortable after the chill outside, and I yawned a few times.

Beside me with her hands on the wheel, Miss Hiratsuka said nothing, humming quietly instead. Her faint breaths and the slow melody were like a lullaby, and my eyelids slid shut. She was driving rather carefully, considering this was a sports car, and the vibrations of its engine were like a cradle.

A night drive to who-knows-where.

As I was nodding off, eventually, the car rolled to a stop.

I looked up to see that there was nothing *to* see, aside from the streetlights standing at regular intervals and the headlights of the vehicles driving down the opposite lane. It was an ordinary road.

"We're here," Miss Hiratsuka said, getting out of the car.

Here? Where…? I thought as I stepped out as well.

Suddenly, the smell of the sea hit my nose. Then seeing the lights of the new city center ahead, I figured out where we were. Right over there was Tokyo Bay, and now we were on the bridge at the mouth of the river. For us students at Soubu High School, this is the spot where you turn back during the February school marathon. The railing of the bridge is covered with couples graffiti, and I have a strong memory of thinking *Eugh* when I saw it before.

Miss Hiratsuka came out to the sidewalk side and tossed a canned coffee at me. It was dark, so I nearly missed it, but I caught it somehow. The can in my hands was still a little warm.

She leaned against the car, and with a cigarette in one hand, she opened up the can of coffee with the other. The gesture oddly suited her.

"You look kinda cool," I said, meaning to tease her.

But she replied, with a cool, dark smile, “That was the goal.”

Aw, man, if you give me a look like that, then I really will think you’re cool!

Continuing to stare at her would make me embarrassed, so I turned my eyes to the ocean instead.

The ocean at night was pitch-black. There were some lights, so I could see the surface of the water moving. It looked particularly soft, and the thought crossed my mind that if you were to sink down there, you’d never rise up again.

As I was staring at the water, Miss Hiratsuka said to me, “How are things going?”

What’s she asking about? There was no context, so I couldn’t say anything, but considering the time of year this was, I figured it was about the Christmas event.

“Pretty bad.”

“…Hmm.” She looked away and breathed out a smoky breath. Then she turned back to me. “What’s looking bad?”

“What exactly? Just in general…”

“Come on, tell me.”

“Fine, then…” After pondering where to start, I launched into my explanation.

First, the biggest problem was lack of time. I didn’t feel like I could turn things around in a week.

The next was the root cause of that lost time, the issues with the way we’d been going about this. Tamanawa took listening to people’s opinions as an absolute, while Isshiki kept seeking out others’ opinions, too… Having those two in charge had wound up wasting time.

In order to improve things, either someone had to take an ax to this, or the two of them had to change their way of thinking, but the chances of either of those possibilities happening was low.

For the former, there was no one who’d take on that responsibility. Anyone who was there only to help out would hold back in front of the student council, while the student council members under the two presidents felt like they needed to defer to authority.

So then you might change how Isshiki and Tamanawa ran things, but that would be arduous, too. Neither of them had been

student council president for very long. It was no surprise they lacked experience. The problem was that neither of them had any vision as leaders that would enable them to succeed. I couldn't see it at all—but I could clearly see their failure. They had to be somewhat afraid that their first job as presidents, which was also a major event involving another school and local organizations, would end in failure.

It's common enough to stumble during your first big performance. Only a bystander can say that failure is a part of the experience—if you're the one who blows it, it's just unpleasant.

People talking from a safe zone will say things like *Just try again next time* and *Everyone experiences failure.* But sometimes there is no next time, and that one failure can have a lasting effect; sometimes you fail at your next chance, too. It's honestly irresponsible to say it's okay to fail. The responsibility for failure falls on their shoulders, not yours.

If you have even a bit of imagination, you can easily understand failure is something to avoid. Tamanawa and Isshiki probably knew that, too.

That was why they sought input from others and adopted it—in order to distribute responsibility in case of failure.

I'm sure they wouldn't tell anyone to their face that their idea was to blame. It would just be a secret consolation in their hearts.

Reporting, contacting, consulting, conferencing, and confirming are all done to increase the number of people involved and distribute one's own responsibility. If you can make it a failure of the whole, the responsibility of the whole, then the emotional burden on each individual decreases.

They get other people to tell them what they should do because they can't handle responsibility themselves.

This was the reason the planning of this event was at a standstill. The original error was that it had never been settled who was on top, who would assume the most responsibility.

"Well, I guess that's basically it…" I wasn't all that sure I'd managed to put it into words well, but I'd spoken my thoughts at length.

Miss Hiratsuka had listened to the whole thing in silence, but then when I was done talking, she nodded, her expression complicated. "…You have a good view of this. You're good at reading people's psychology."

That wasn't true at all. All I was doing was supposing what I would think if I were in that position.

When I was about to respond with that, Miss Hiratsuka stuck up her index finger to stop me. Then she looked me in the eye as she slowly put the words together. "But you don't understand feelings."

My breath caught. Not my voice, words, or even a sigh came out. I felt as if I'd been struck to the core. And I realized the true nature of what I, Hachiman Hikigaya, had not tried to understand—despite being told the same thing a long time ago. She said I should "consider people's feelings more" and that I "understand so many things, so why can't you get that?"

When I didn't say anything, Miss Hiratsuka crushed her cigarette in a portable ashtray and said, "Psychology is not always equivalent to feelings. That's why, occasionally, you'll end up with a conclusion that looks completely unreasonable… That's why Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, and you all come up with the wrong answers."

"…Uh, they don't have anything to do with this, though," I retorted. I was taken aback, hearing those names now. That wasn't something I wanted to talk or think about much at the moment.

Miss Hiratsuka shot me a glare. "I was asking about them to begin with," she said in a disgruntled manner, then lit another cigarette. Yeah, she hadn't said what she was asking about. I'd just assumed it was about the Christmas event. "But, well, both are the same, in essence. There's one root problem… The heart." She blew out a breath. The haze of her smoke changed form, then quickly vanished.

Heart. Feelings. Emotion.

I followed the trail of smoke as it melted into the air. Maybe I could still see something; maybe not.

But that was conceit. In the end, I couldn't see anything. I'd meant to take people's feelings into account, but I'd only been seeing what was on the surface. I'd taken my hypothesis as truth and acted based on that. How was that anything other than self-satisfaction?

So I'll probably never really get it.

"But…that's not something I can understand just by mulling it over," I said.

If I can see something in terms of advantages and disadvantages, risk and return, then I'll understand it. Those things

make sense to me.

Desire and self-preservation, jealousy and hate. They're common, ugly emotions, and when they form the root of a behavioral psychology, I can form an analogy—since I have plenty of examples to draw from inside me. That's why it's easy for me to imagine. In those cases, there's still room for me to understand. I can explain it with theory.

But it's hard for anything else.

When the arithmetic of profit and loss is set aside, people's feelings beyond logic and theory are hard to imagine. There are too few clues, and most of all, I've been wrong too many times at this point.

Goodwill, friendship, love, and everything else in that category have only ever brought about misunderstanding. Every time I think, *Okay,* this *time I get it*, I make a mess of things again.

Whether it's getting a text, or happening by chance to touch someone, or meeting their gaze in class and getting a smile in return, or hearing a rumor that someone liked me, or talking a lot because we were seated next to each other, or always going home at the same time, I get it wrong every single time.

Even if… If by chance, I was right after all…

I'm not confident that I can really believe in that. Excluding all other elements for good judgment, with any and every obstacle established, I don't feel like I could still say that feeling is real.

If things change continuously, then there's no right answer. I don't think you can come up with one.

Listening to me, Miss Hiratsuka's lips curled up a little, and then she fixed me with a strict look. "You don't get it? Then keep mulling it over. If all you can do is calculate, then calculate everything you can. Come up with every answer, reducing them one by one by process of elimination. Whatever remains is your answer." Her intense gaze was focused on me. But this was an irrational line of argument. No—it wasn't even an argument.

She was saying that if you can only make conjectures about people via theories and calculation, then you should look through everything and calculate everything—to eliminate every possibility you can think of via process of elimination and set it aside.

What an inefficient and pointless process. And what's more, even if I did do that, there was no guarantee I'd get an answer. Thanks to my exasperation and shock, the words wouldn't come out

quite right. "…I don't think that would help me understand."

"Which would mean either your calculations were wrong, or you overlooked something. You do the calculation over again." Her serious tone made me think it was all a joke, like it was nothing. She said it like it was such an obvious fact.

I gave a hollow laugh. "You're ridiculous…"

"You fool. If you could calculate feelings, we would've computerized them a long time ago. Whatever answer remains that you can't calculate, that's human feelings." The words she used were rough, but her tone was kind.

Like she said, I think there are things you can't calculate. And even if you did, you'd probably have something left over afterward to prevent a clean sense of satisfaction. Like pi or an infinitely repeating decimal.

But that isn't abandoning thought. If there's no answer, then you keep thinking. That's far from repose—it's something like torture.

Just imagining something like that sent a chill up my spine. I reflexively drew the collar of my coat against myself.

Miss Hiratsuka chuckled. "Well, I say that, but my calculations are full of mistakes, which is probably why I can't get married… The other day, a friend of mine had a wedding, you know…," she said, a masochistic smile creeping on her face. Normally, this was where I would tease her with an offhand comment.

But I didn't feel like it this time. "No, that's because you have no taste in men."

"Huh? Wh-where's this coming from?" Startled, she mumbled in embarrassment and turned away.

But it wasn't really flattery. If I'd been born ten years earlier, if I'd met her ten years earlier, I think I'd probably have sincerely fallen for her. Not that speculating about it has a point.

The image was so funny, I couldn't help but laugh, and Miss Hiratsuka chuckled pleasantly with me. After that bout of laughter, she cleared her throat. "W-well, whatever. I'm not sure if I can call this thanks, but…I'll give you a special hint," she said, and when she turned to me once more, her expression was earnest. Her chiding tone made me stand up straight and look her in the eye. When I told her with my gaze that I was ready to listen, she slowly began to speak.

"When you're mulling over this, don't focus on the wrong

thing.”

“Okay…”

Her words were a little vague, though. It was too abstract and functionally no hint at all.

She must have been able to tell from my face that I didn’t understand, and she tilted her head. “Hmm, yeah… For example, the reason you’re helping Isshiki as an individual instead of as a part of the Service Club. Think about that. It’s either for the Service Club or for Yukinoshita’s sake.”

This speculation and the name she’d brought up suddenly startled me. When my head jerked over to her, I found her smiling wryly. “It’s clear to anyone watching. After the incident with Isshiki, Yukinoshita spoke with me… She doesn’t talk about herself, but I could tell from the way she was acting that something might be going on. Was it the same with you?”

“Uhhh, well, I don’t know…,” I said noncommittally, searching for how to answer.

But Miss Hiratsuka didn’t wait to hear it and continued. “If you had the same thoughts, then you would’ve decided to distance yourself from them so as not to hurt them…perhaps. Though I’m just speculating here.”

“…Well, yeah, it’s just speculation,” I said, telling myself it was nothing more than that. This was merely a case study, and what Miss Hiratsuka had said was not necessarily the reality of the situation.

Miss Hiratsuka nodded back, as if confirming with me. “But that’s not what you should be thinking about. In this case, what you should be considering is why you don’t want to hurt them. That’ll lead you to your answer quickly—it’s because you care about them.” Miss Hiratsuka fixed me a focused stare. I could tell she wouldn’t allow me to argue or even look away.

Illuminated by the orange streetlights and the headlights of the cars driving by, her face seemed full of sorrow, but in a soft, warm voice, she murmured, “But you know, Hikigaya, you can’t *not* hurt them. You’ll unconsciously hurt someone merely by existing. Whether you’re alive or dead, you will always hurt someone. It can happen when you involve yourself with them, or when you avoid involving yourself. It’s inevitable…”

At this point, she pulled out a cigarette. Looking at it intently, she continued. “But if it’s someone you don’t care about, you won’t

even notice the pain you inflicted. What you need is self-awareness. It's because you care about them that you believe you hurt them." Once she was done saying this, she finally put the cigarette in her mouth. Her lighter made a *flick* sound like striking a stone, and then a soft glow lit her face. Her eyes were closed as if she were sleeping, expression peaceful. Then she exhaled a big breath of smoke and added, "To care about someone is to be prepared for the day you'll hurt them."

She was staring at the sky.

Wondering exactly what she was looking at now, I followed her gaze. Above our heads, the clouds had broken at some point, and faint moonlight was seeping through.

"That's it for your hints," she said. She pushed herself off the car and smiled at me, then stretched with a little groan. "And sometimes, caring about each other is the reason why you don't understand. But that's not something to be sad about. I think it's something to be proud of."

That was a very beautiful thing to say, but it was nothing more. Wanting something you can't have, seeing it just beyond your reach, has to hurt. If you could just not want it or see it, then you'd be able to give up on it.

When this thought struck me, I found myself asking, "…Isn't that harsh?"

"Yeah, it is," she said, coming one step closer to me to lean on her car again. "…But you can do it. I did. Once." She had a rather unyielding smile on her face. She didn't tell me a lot, but I'm sure plenty had happened, a long time ago. I didn't know if it was okay for me to ask what. Once I get a little older, one day, will she tell me about it?

I realized I was looking forward to that a little and looked away. Then while I was at it, I said something unkind. "It's a little arrogant to say just because you did it, other people should be able to," I complained.

She petted my head roughly, sort of like the iron claw. "… You're not even a little cute." Feeling a grinding pain on my skull, when I gasped, she suddenly eased up. But her hand wouldn't leave my head. "…All right, I'll be frank," she said, and her tone lowered substantially. My head was in her grip, so I shifted my eyes toward her and saw a hint of a sad smile. "It probably doesn't really have to be you. Yukinoshita might change herself sometime in the future.

One day, someone who can understand her might show up. Maybe they can get close to her. That's something I can say to Yuigahama, too."

"One day?"

When would that be? It seemed like a distant future far removed from reality, and yet something especially real and inevitably soon.

"I'm sure to all of you, right now feels like everything, but that's not true at all. Somewhere along the line, things can balance out. The world is made that way."

Was that right? That someday, someone was sure to make that approach? The thought of that unshakable fact caused a mild ache inside me, and I twisted around to hide it.

The hand on my head moved away to rest on my shoulder. Miss Hiratsuka's voice felt far closer than before, too. "…But I think it would be good if it could be you. I hope both you and Yuigahama will be the ones to close the distance."

"…But I can't just—," I started to say, and right then, she softly embraced me around the shoulders. The closeness and faint warmth made my words fizzle out.

When I froze under the sudden gesture, Miss Hiratsuka looked me in the eye and said, "This time now isn't everything…but there are things that you can do only now and things that are only here. It's now, Hikigaya. It's *now*."

I couldn't look away from her dewy eyes. Right that moment, I had no response for that earnest gaze. So I said nothing.

Her arm over my shoulders squeezed. "If you don't mull it over, suffer with it, struggle and agonize—if you don't work at it, then it isn't real," she said and then abruptly pulled away.

Then as if to say, *The lecture ends here*, she put on her usual easygoing and cool smile. And with that, finally, I unfroze.

After everything she said, many, many replies rose in my heart. But I didn't spit them out. I should think about these things, distill them, and swallow them myself, I knew.

So I'd say something else. Something rude, instead of thanks. "…But it's not like it's real just because you suffered."

"You really aren't at all cute." She laughed pleasantly and bonked my head from behind. "…Okay, let's go back. Get in," she said before climbing into the driver's seat.

I replied with an "Uh-huh" and was about to circle around to

the passenger's side.

As I did so, I happened to look at the sky.

The moon had peeked out from the gap in the clouds, but it was already hidden away again. There was nothing to illuminate the night sky, and the chilly wind was so sharp, it felt like it was stabbing my cheeks.

But strangely, I didn't feel cold. Warmth lingered in my body.

6

But even so, **Hachiman Hikigaya**…

As I sank into the living room sofa, I heard the long hand of the wall clock ticking out time. When I glanced over, the short hand was circling the top.

Quite a while had passed since Miss Hiratsuka had taken me home.

Komachi and our parents had already finished dinner, and they'd all gone back to their rooms. Kamakura was probably sleeping in Komachi's room now, too.

Occasionally, the *kotatsu* would make a low buzzing noise—maybe because it was an older model. Nobody was using it, but it seemed to have been left on. I got up to turn it off, then went back to the sofa.

Right now, the chill of the room was actually helpful to me. It kept me from getting sleepy, and most of all, my head was clear like a cold sky.

Miss Hiratsuka really had given me hints. And probably not only that day. She'd been teaching me all this time—though I'd always overlooked it, or misunderstood it, or missed it. So I figured I should rethink things from the beginning one more time.

I had to reestablish and reexamine the problem.

Right now, the biggest obstacle at hand was, of course, the Christmas event between Kaihin and Soubu. Though I'd volunteered to help, the situation was close to collapsing.

Along with that was the problem with Iroha Isshiki. I was the one who'd recommended her for student council president, but she was not doing a good job of running things.

Rumi Tsurumi's situation was tangled up in this, too. I don't

know how what I did in Chiba Village during summer vacation had affected her. But right now, it didn't look like she was in a good situation.

And…as for the Service Club…

Just thinking about that last problem gave me a bad feeling, and I wasn't getting anything that seemed like a resolution. Whenever I tried to find somewhere to start, all I got was resigned expressions and forced cheerful smiles.

After I got stuck on that matter and spent a lot of time mulling it over, I decided that issue should be left for later.

Regarding the other three problems: The goals there were clearly established, making them easy to understand. One was to use this event to ensure Isshiki could manage as student council president. I also had to make it so Rumi could smile whether she was alone or with others. Further, I also had to arrange for proper cooperation between us and the Kaihin crowd, Tamanawa included, and to make the event actually happen within the scope of what was possible.

If I could accomplish this, then I should be able to quickly find a solution.

I went around rearranging the problem in my head like a computer defragging its hard drive to find the optimal answer. All these things were connected to the joint Christmas event. The three problems all converged here.

I just had to think of a way to make this the perfect success.

But having worked on it for the past week, I understood this wouldn't be easy. I doubted I could reverse the situation on my own. I'd already spoken to Tamanawa multiple times, asking if we could change our approach.

What should I do? Should I ask someone for help?

The only person I could rely on would be Komachi, but she was studying for her entrance exams. Given her situation, I shouldn't bother her. She had less than two months, and I really couldn't get help from her. It was obviously unacceptable for me to obstruct this turning point in my little sister's life.

So then who? Zaimokuza? It wouldn't hurt me much to bother him. And besides, he probably had nothing better to do. But I sincerely doubted Zaimokuza would function well in this sort of social situation. He was already bad at communicating with people at the best of times, so if it was with people from other schools,

then he'd be even worse.

…No, I understand it's not Zaimokuza's fault.

The responsibility, and the cause of this, was with me.

I'm pathetic.

Why was my first thought looking to someone else for help? I'd gotten help once, so now I was starting to believe it was okay, immediately trying to rely on others again.

When had I become so weak?

Connections between people have gotta be a drug. You don't even realize you've become dependent, and every time, it slowly gnaws into your heart. Eventually, you can't do anything without relying on others.

Have I been making people suffer when I've tried to help them? Have I created people who can't stand without assistance?

I should not have given fish but taught how to fish.

Anything you can easily get from someone else is bound to be fake. If someone can give you something easily, then surely they can steal it from you just as easily.

During the student council election, I'd gotten a reason from Komachi. I had told myself it was for Komachi's sake, to keep the Service Club going, and taken action.

I was probably wrong that time.

I should have acted based on an answer I'd found—my own reason.

Even now, I was trying to look to someone else for a reason to act. For Isshiki, for Rumi, for the event.

Was there really a reason for me to act? I got the feeling I'd been working from the wrong presuppositions. I was confused about what I should be thinking about.

If I was going to correct these wrongs, then I had to go back to where it had all started.

What have I been doing all this time? What was the reason? I turned over the events I'd just been thinking about, considering them in reverse chronological order.

The reason I needed to make the Christmas event a success was that I wanted to help Iroha Isshiki and Rumi Tsurumi, and the direct reason I was assisting with this event in particular was because I'd recommended Isshiki as president during the student council election. During that election, I'd recommended her so I could keep Yukinoshita or Yuigahama from becoming president. So

why hadn't I wanted either of them as president? The real reason I'd acted—the real reason I'd made myself search for a motive, a pretext from Komachi—was…

…because there was something I wanted.

I think maybe this was the only thing I've truly desired. I didn't need anything else, and I even hated anything that wasn't it. But I'd never attained it, so I'd believed that it didn't exist.

But I had felt like I'd caught a glimpse of it. Like I'd touched it, like I could reach it.

That was how I went astray.

I'd come up with the question. So then I'd mull it over—my answer.

I don't know how long I stayed like that, but the blue night was already starting to melt away as the sky tinged faintly white.

I'd spent the whole night thinking, but I couldn't come up with any methods, strategies, artifices, or anything. I couldn't come up with any logic, theory, argument, or sophistry.

That's why, I think…this is my answer.

X X X

I was in the classroom after school, stretching wide at my desk. I shifted a little, and my neck and back cracked.

In the end, I'd hardly slept at all that night, so I spent the day at school on barely any sleep. Thanks to that, as soon as I arrived in the classroom, I'd lain facedown on my desk, ignoring everyone and everything all day.

But now I was wide-awake.

I was half in doubt about the answer I'd spent an evening coming to. I still didn't know whether it was right.

But I couldn't think of anything else.

I breathed one last big sigh and stood up.

I was headed to one place.

After leaving the classroom, I walked down the hallway.

The chill of the empty hallway didn't bother me. My blood flow

had been on the fast side for a while now; my body temperature was high for no reason. The sound of the wind against the windows and the yelling of the sports clubs in the distance didn't reach me. I couldn't hear anything but the words I had to say as I repeated them over and over in my head.

Ahead of me was that door. It was still, silent, and closed.

I waited in front of it and took the slightest of breaths. Then I knocked two, three times. Until now, I'd never knocked to go in. But if I was going to act in accordance with my goal right now, then this was the etiquette.

I waited for a while, but there was no answer from within.

I knocked one more time.

"Come in…," said a voice faintly through the door.

Huh, I'd never thought about it before, but this is what it sounds like when there's a door between us. Once I was acknowledged, I put my hand on the handle.

There was a rattling sound as the door caught. It was heavy. Had it always been? With a firm tug, I forced it open.

When I entered, I saw two very surprised faces in their usual places.

"Hikki. Why're you knocking?" Cell phone in her hand, as it always was, Yui Yuigahama stared at me in confusion.

Yukino Yukinoshita stopped reading, sticking a bookmark in her book before setting it down. She lowered her eyes and focused on the desk in front of her. Quietly, as if talking to herself and no one else, she muttered, "…I said you didn't have to force yourself to come."

I waited to speak until she had finished. I wanted to make sure I heard everything. "…I have a reason," I replied briefly.

She didn't say anything else, and I just stood there. As we remained like that, a silence fell over us, as if an angel had passed.

Yuigahama looked between Yukinoshita and me, then took a deep breath. "Wh-why don't you sit down?" she offered.

I nodded back at her and pulled out a nearby chair. When I sat down, the girls were in front of me. For the first time, I realized, *Oh, this is what the people who came for consultation and requests always saw*. The chair I'd always used before was empty, still diagonally across from Yukinoshita.

"What is it? …You seem kinda different from usual." Yuigahama sounded uneasy.

Of course I was. I hadn't come as a member of the club today.

After thinking and puzzling and reflecting, I'd come up with a single answer.

I had made a mistake, and that question had already been answered. I couldn't resolve the same question again.

But I was sure I could ask it again. This time, *this* time I would do it the right way, with the right process, and start getting new right answers. I couldn't think of any other way.

Exhaling a big breath, I squared my gaze on Yukinoshita and Yuigahama.

"I want to make a request."

After saying them over and over in my head so many times, the words came out smoother than I'd imagined.

Maybe that was why Yuigahama looked relieved to hear it. "Hikki… You'll actually talk to us…" She smiled warmly.

Yukinoshita did not; she didn't even come close. Her eyes were on me, but they weren't seeing me. With that cold gaze on me, my voice slowly got weaker.

"About the Christmas event Isshiki was talking about, it's in worse shape than I'd ever imagined, and I'd like your help…"

When I managed to finish, Yukinoshita's gaze dropped, and she began with hesitation. "But…"

"Oh, I know what you're gonna say." I cut her off before she could shoot me down. "I chose to do this on my own, and I said this wasn't for Isshiki, too. But I'm the one who pushed her to be president. If you're looking for someone to blame, I know it's me."

It'd be bad if Yukinoshita were to refuse me now. I didn't have anything prepared to persuade her, but still, I couldn't let her tell me no. I set out every reason I could think up. "Do you remember that kid from Chiba Village? She's the same as before…"

"Oh…Rumi, yes?" Yuigahama made a complicated expression. That event wouldn't be a pleasant memory for anyone. I'd forced the worst results on all of us. I had helped no one.

That was the way I had been doing things, and I'd made a mess. I didn't want to get it wrong this time, so I pleaded with her desperately. "So I want to do something. That goes back to what I did, and I know this is a selfish request. But still, I want to make it."

When I finished, I looked over at Yukinoshita to see her fists laid on the desk were squeezed tight.

"So that's what you mean by your fault."

"…Well, I can't deny it is," I replied. Whether directly or indirectly, the underlying cause of these problems was my own actions. That was a clear fact.

Yukinoshita lowered her eyes and bit her lip. "I see…" She lifted her face, her voice sounding like a sigh. Her dewy eyes captured me for a moment but immediately looked away again. There was a silence, as if she was searching for the words, and then she calmly began again. "…If these outcomes are your individual responsibility, then you should resolve these issues by yourself."

My breath caught for a moment. But still, I couldn't stay silent. Hoarsely, I replied, "…Yeah. Sorry, forget about it."

I had no more moves to make. There was absolutely nothing else I could think of. And besides, most importantly, she was right according to all the rules and principles.

So this was enough to satisfy me, logically speaking.

I started getting up to leave the clubroom.

But a fervent call followed me. "Wait." Yuigahama's voice broke the silence of the cold room.

She looked at me and Yukinoshita with teary eyes.

"That's not right. Why should you have to do everything yourself? That's weird," she said, voice trembling. Yukinoshita and I had been convinced by logic, but Yuigahama judged us wrong based on different reasoning.

That was very her, and my cheeks relaxed a bit. With that weak smile, slowly, wondering who I was even trying to say this to, I replied as if I were explaining to a small child. "No, it's not weird. You wipe your own ass. That's obvious."

"…That's right," Yukinoshita agreed after a slight pause.

After Yukinoshita and I had spoken, Yuigahama immediately shook her head. "No! What you guys are saying is all wrong!" She seemed ready to burst into tears at any moment, and when I looked at her face, I felt something tighten in my chest. I wanted to look away, but the kindness in her voice wouldn't let me.

"Listen, it's not your individual responsibility, Hikki. Maybe you were the one who thought things up and carried them out. But we're responsible, too. We pushed everything on you…"

"…No, you didn't." I searched for the right rebuttal as she hung her head low. Neither of them had really forced anything on me. In fact, they'd helped me quite a lot.

But when Yuigahama lifted her head and glared at me, she was

nearly crying. “We did! It’s not just your fault that things ended up this way. It’s my fault, too, and…” She turned to Yukinoshita. Her gaze implied the responsibility of one more person here.

Yukinoshita returned the stare but didn’t say anything. She pressed her lips tight, bracing for the inevitable accusation.

Yuigahama faltered, unsure how to respond to that, and her next words were quiet. “…And I think what you’re saying is a little dirty, Yukinon.” Her voice was soft, but her gaze was firmly pointed at Yukinoshita. Her eyes were more serious—aggressive, even.

Yukinoshita didn’t break eye contact. After a moment’s pause, as if hesitating as to whether she should say it or not, she replied, “…So now you say that… You’re being unfair, too.” Her voice was quiet yet sharply cold.

Yuigahama bit her lip. Their gazes clashed, nearly glaring at each other.

“Wait, I didn’t come here to play the blame game.” I didn’t care about who was at fault or searching for a culprit. Neither did I want some self-aggrandizing conclusion, like *Everyone’s to blame*. I’d planned to come here to talk about something else.

I didn’t want to see Yukinoshita and Yuigahama arguing like this.

But they didn’t listen to my call to stop. Both of them locked stares with some reluctance, but nevertheless, the words rushing from their mouths never stopped.

Yuigahama’s white throat trembled as she swallowed. She leveled her teary-eyed gaze at Yukinoshita and slowly put together the words. “You won’t talk to us, Yukinon… Sometimes people won’t understand unless you speak up.”

“…You didn’t speak up, either. You just kept pretending nothing had happened.” Yukinoshita’s voice was icy. Her face reminded me of a frozen sculpture as she dispassionately stated simple facts. She must have been referring to how we’d been spending our club time lately. “So I figured if that was what you… what you two wanted…,” she added in an almost inaudible mutter, and Yuigahama ground to a halt.

Yukinoshita had been feeling it, too. This room was cold and hollow, and the three of us inside were patiently waiting for it to end.

Yuigahama and I had both accepted that temporary folly. And maybe our choice had forced Yukinoshita to be like that, too.

All of us had failed to speak the truth. All of us had failed to say anything we'd wanted.

We'd made assumptions. About one another—about how we would act.

But ideals and understanding are completely different things.

"…People won't understand if you don't speak up?" I repeated.

Yuigahama's words stuck in my chest. If you don't speak up, then people won't understand. That's clear enough. But will they understand even if you do?

Yuigahama turned to me after the sudden question slipped from my lips. Yukinoshita was staring at the ground. Prompted by Yuigahama's gaze, I commented, "But sometimes, even if you do speak up, people won't get it."

Yuigahama's mouth twisted sadly. Droplets rose in the corners of her eyes, ready to fall. That was why I tried to speak as kindly as I could. "…I don't think I'd be persuaded by anything people say. I might decide there's something behind their words or assume there's a hidden motive for what they're saying."

Yukinoshita tended to be overly laconic, and Yuigahama avoided things by speaking vaguely.

And on top of that, I had the habit of reading too much into what people say.

That was why when Yukinoshita had said she was going to run for president, even if she had spoken about it more directly, I doubt I'd have taken her words at face value. In attempting to divine her real intentions, I would have taken whatever she said and tangled it up with other ideas until eventually I got it wrong anyway.

People only see what they want to see and hear what they want to hear. I'm no exception.

Yuigahama rubbed at her eyes, then jerked her head up. "But if you just come out and talk about it more—if I could talk more with you, Hikki, then I…"

"No." I shook my head slowly at her words.

Everyone says, "I won't understand if you don't speak up"—but they don't how hard it is to communicate. They just picked up the idea from someone else somewhere and swallowed it wholesale.

But it's common enough for people not to understand, and there are things that will break if you speak.

"It's arrogant to believe someone will understand just because you told them something. The one saying it is only doing it for their

own benefit, and the one hearing it is thinking too highly of themselves… After what's done is done, discussion won't necessarily lead to an understanding. So I don't want words." As I spoke, I trembled a little. I happened to glance outside the window and saw the sunset was gradually nearing. The room was getting colder.

Yukinoshita was silent as she listened to everything, but she gently wrapped her arms around her shoulders, as if warming herself.

Yuigahama sniffed, then wiped her eyes. Tearfully, she said, "But if you don't say anything, then you'll never know…"

"Yeah… It's a fantasy to think you could understand without words… But… But I…"

As I searched for the rest of what I was about to say, my vision got cloudy.

Before me, there were no words to be found. All I saw were eyes rubbed red and a profile with long eyelashes lowered toward the ground.

Suddenly, the image blurred.

"I…" I repeated myself, but I couldn't figure out what would come next.

What should I say? I'd already voiced everything I'd wanted to, all the concerns that had been on my mind. I'd already considered the words I needed to ask the questions again, to stack them all up from square one. There was honestly nothing left. I'd exhausted everything.

Ahhh, that's right. In the end, everything I was trying to say was just deliberation and logic, nothing more than calculation, technique, and artifice. I could run with it as far as I wanted and think about it over and over, but the result would always be the same.

But even though I still couldn't understand this situation at all, no matter how far I mulled it over, I was still searching for something I should say, what I wanted to say. I knew they wouldn't get it, whatever I said. I knew it was pointless, but…

I didn't want words. But what I wanted definitely existed.

It's not that I want us to understand one another, be friends, talk, or be together. I don't need them to understand me. I know they won't, and I don't wish them to. What I'm looking for is something harsher and more severe. I want to know. I want to understand. I want to know so I

can feel relief. I want peace of mind, because ignorance is absolutely terrifying. Complete understanding is such a self-righteous, selfish, and arrogant thing to wish for. It's despicable and repulsive, really. I'm beyond disgusted with myself for wanting it.

But if—if we could feel the same way…

If we could impose that ugly self-satisfaction on one another, if there's some sort of relationship that could permit that arrogance…

I know something like that is absolutely impossible. I bet I'll never attain something like that.

I'm sure the grapes out of my reach are sour.

But I don't need fruit sweet like lies. I don't need false understanding or phony relationships.

What I want is those sour grapes.

Even if it's sour, even if it's bitter, even if it tastes bad, even if it's pure poison, even if it doesn't exist, even if I can't acquire it, even if what I want cannot be allowed…

"Still…" The word came out of me unbidden, and even I could hear it trembling.

"Still, I…" I fought down the sob that nearly escaped and tried to swallow the sound along with the rest of the sentence, but they both came out in fragments. My teeth rattled, and my throat was tight as the words left my mouth anyway.

"I want…something real."

My eyes felt hot. My vision was blurry. I could hear nothing but the sound of my breathing.

Yukinoshita and Yuigahama were both staring at me, surprise on their faces.

What a mess, hoarse and pathetic and pleading on the verge of tears. I didn't want to accept myself like this. I didn't want to show it. I didn't want to be seen. What I was saying was incoherent anyway. There was no logic or cause and effect anywhere. This was nonsense.

My throat was trembling with every hot, damp breath that threatened to become another sob to stifle.

"Hikki…," Yuigahama said to me, gently reaching out her hand. But the distance between us was too great. Her hand wouldn't reach me, and she dropped it weakly.

Not just her hand. I don't know if my words reached her, either.

What could they understand from what I was saying? I was sure they wouldn't understand, even after all that. But I'd still spoken up

for myself more than anything else. Or maybe that choice was the very deception we detested. Maybe it was a hopeless counterfeit.

But no matter how I turned it over in my head, no answer emerged. I had no idea what to do. So all that remained at the end was, honestly, this hopeless wish.

"I…don't understand," Yukinoshita murmured. Her arms around her shoulders squeezed harder, and her expression twisted painfully. With a quick, quiet apology, Yukinoshita stood from her seat. Without looking at us, she continued quickly toward the door.

"Yukinon!" Yuigahama stood, about to follow her. But in concern for me, she turned around.

I could only watch.

Hazy though it was, I saw Yukinoshita leave the clubroom, and then I purged the hot breaths stored up in my chest.

Maybe I was kind of relieved it was finally over.

"Hikki." As I sat there, Yuigahama grabbed my arm. Then she tugged me to my feet. Her face and mine came close. With wet eyes brimming with tears, she looked straight into mine. "…We have to go."

"No, but…"

The conclusion had already been made. There were no more words to say or feelings to communicate. A dry, somewhat self-deprecating laugh slipped from me, and I turned away.

But she didn't back down.

"We'll go together! …Yukinon said she didn't understand. I think she doesn't know what she should do, either… I don't get it at all, either, but— But we can't let it end here! We have to understand! It has to be now. I've never seen her like that! So we have to go…," she insisted. She released my arm, taking my hand instead. Her hand was hot, squeezing tight.

One more time, she pulled my arm—more gently than before. It felt timid, as if she was testing me. I think she didn't actually know what to do herself. Still holding my hand, she stared at me anxiously.

That was why I gently shook off her grip.

As soon as I did, her arm dropped weakly, and she looked like she was about to cry.

But that wasn't what I meant. I wouldn't take someone's hand out of unease. I didn't want to have someone supporting me because I couldn't walk alone. It wasn't time to hold hands with

someone yet.

Right now, I'd walk properly—on my own two feet.

"…I can walk by myself. I'm fine. Let's go," I said and headed for the door first.

"Y-yeah!" she called, and I could hear her following. Checking she was behind me, I opened the door and came out into the hallway.

And Iroha Isshiki was right there, frozen in shock.

"Ah, hi… U-uhhh, I meant to say something, but…" She looked panicked as she tried to talk her way out of this, but now wasn't the time to be bothering with her.

"Iroha-chan? Sorry, another time, okay?" Yuigahama turned her aside and ran off.

I was about to follow after her when Isshiki called me to a stop. "Th-there's no meeting today! I came to say that… A-and—"

"Yeah, got it," I replied without letting her finish. Yuigahama was waiting for me a little ways down the hall, but before I could run after her, there was a tug on my blazer's sleeve.

I looked over, thinking, *What, already?* to see Isshiki sighing in exasperation. Then she pointed upward. "Let me finish, please… Yukinoshita went up the stairs!"

"Sorry. Thanks," I said to Isshiki and immediately called out to Yuigahama. "Yuigahama, she's up above."

Yuigahama rushed straight back to me, and the two of us climbed the stairs of the special-use building.

If Isshiki was right, Yukinoshita had probably run to the aerial corridor.

The fourth-floor hallway that connected the school building and the special building was uncovered, like a roof. Because it was exposed to the wind, it was especially cold around this time of winter, and hardly anyone used it.

We rushed up the stairs to arrive at the landing directly below the aerial corridor.

Opening the glass door, I stepped outside.

The special-use building blocked off the afterglow in the west, and the setting sun poured down on the corridor through the glass. The sky in the east was beginning to grow dark.

On the aerial corridor on the cusp of sunset, we found Yukinoshita.

She was leaning against the railing, lost in thought while her

hair fluttered in the cold wind. The sunset illuminated her sleek black hair and white porcelain skin. Her sorrowful eyes gazed into the distance, toward the crowds of tall buildings that were beginning to light up for the night.

"Yukinon!"

Yuigahama ran up to Yukinoshita, and I followed at a slower pace. I was breathing hard after the sprint up the steps.

"Yukinoshita…," I called between pants, but she didn't turn around.

But it seemed she did hear me, nevertheless. "…I…don't understand," she murmured, her voice unsteady.

Those words again.

They stopped my feet right where they were.

A chilly wind blew through, cutting the way between us, and Yukinoshita spun around. Her wet eyes were listless, and her hand against her chest was clenched tight, like she was holding something back.

The wind tossed her hair until it was completely disheveled, but she made no attempt to fix it. With a tinge of hoarseness in her voice, she asked, "What do you mean by *something real*?"

"Well…"

I didn't really know, myself. I'd never seen anything truly real before and never experienced anything like it. I didn't know what I could point to and say, *Yeah, this is it*. Of course, there was no way anyone else could understand, either. But that was what I wished for.

When I was unable to reply, Yuigahama stepped forward and gently laid her hand on Yukinoshita's shoulder. "It's okay, Yukinon."

"…What is?" Yukinoshita asked, and Yuigahama smiled bashfully.

"I actually don't really get it, either…" Stroking her bun to cover her awkwardness, Yuigahama retracted her smile. Then she took one more step toward Yukinoshita, placing another hand on Yukinoshita's other shoulder and looking straight at her. "So I think if we talk it over, we'll understand better. But I probably won't get it, even then. And I probably never will. But, like, I guess I understand that… Actually, I don't really get it. But… But…I…"

A single tear streaked down Yuigahama's cheek.

"I…don't wanna leave it like this…," she said, pulling

Yukinoshita into a hug. And as if the thread of tension had broken, she sobbed. Yukinoshita was unable to return her embrace, breaths slipping through her trembling lips.

I shifted my eyes away.

I had mulled it over, but the answer I had given was the only one I could get. Those words were the only ones that would come out. So how could she— How could Yuigahama speak so clearly?

One of us could only employ a roundabout, twisted, and falsehood-tinged truth.

One of us was unable to put the feelings she had into words, and so she kept silent.

You can't communicate without words, and yet words only create more problems—so then exactly what could we understand?

The conviction Yukino Yukinoshita had. The relationship Yui Yuigahama sought. The something real Hachiman Hikigaya wanted.

I still didn't know how different those things might be.

But honest tears were the one thing that told me—that this, right now, wasn't wrong.

Yukinoshita gently stroked Yuigahama's hair, against her shoulder.

"Why are you crying…? You really are…unfair." Clinging to Yuigahama, Yukinoshita pushed her face into the other girl's shoulder. I could hear a quiet sob.

The two of them stood there, supporting each other. Eventually, Yukinoshita exhaled a long breath and lifted her face. "…Hikigaya."

"Yeah?" I replied, waiting for her to continue.

Yukinoshita wasn't looking at me. But I still felt the strong, resolute will in her voice. "We accept your request."

"…Sorry." I lowered my head. Despite how short the word was, my voice nearly shook. When I lifted my face, Yuigahama also raised her head from Yukinoshita's shoulder.

"I'll help, too…," she said in a tight voice, turning toward me. When her eyes met mine, she gave me a teary-eyed smile.

"…Thanks," I said, and then for no reason, I looked up at the sky.

The orange sunset was starting to blur.

7

Someday, **Yui Yuigahama** will…

I went home and collapsed into the couch.

After what had happened, we'd returned to the clubroom in silence. With that indescribable awkwardness and embarrassment still lingering between us, we'd said our farewells and left.

Yukinoshita was the first to depart, saying she was going to return the key, while I ran away to the bicycle parking and Yuigahama dashed off to the bus stop. I feel like the three of us hadn't exchanged more than a handful of words.

Sinking into the sofa, I thought back on what had happened that day.

Why did I say something so embarrassing…?

Waaaaagh! I want to die! I want to diiiiie! I don't wanna go to school tomorroooow! I'm such an idiot! I'm such an idiot! You moron! Moron! Wahhhhhhh!

Screaming in my head, I moaned low and rolled around on the sofa. Of course, the sofa wasn't that big, so after about three turns, I fell onto the floor.

The sound startled the family cat; Kamakura jumped out from under the nearby *kotatsu*, skittered around the room, and then zvezdashed right out of the living room.

I was struck with some completely trivial thoughts, like *Seeing a cat running from floor level is more interesting than I thought*, and *Well, cheetahs are felines, too, and Peter is Shinnosuke Ikehata, huh?*

I laid myself facedown there on the carpet.

"…I want to die," I muttered quietly.

When it comes to traumatic flashbacks, there are two stages: first, a high-energy destructive impulse, and then low-energy

depression.

I writhed around intensely, then slumped like a puppet with its strings cut, only to do it all over again. It's like when you approach a cicada you think is dead, but it's actually alive and kicking. I'm a bug.

After facing myself and suffering for a while, I started to resign myself to the situation. I breathed a big sigh and then rolled over. Komachi must have just been coming into the living room that moment, as my eyes met with hers when she was right at the door. She seemed very weirded out.

"…What's going on, Bro?" she asked, half in exasperation, half in fear.

Right then, I couldn't even bring myself to want to interact with my adorable little sister. I jerked my head away. "Leave me alone. Big Bro's having a bit of an identity crisis right now," I said in a sluggish and gloomy tone.

Komachi breathed a dramatic sigh. "Listen, Bro."

Since she was addressing me so properly, I turned my neck to look at her. Her eyes were unimpressed, and her mouth was bent in a reverse-V frown. And then, with that strange look on her face, she said, "Identity? What? So the idiot who goes on about individuality this, individuality that all the time has no individuality himself, huh? If it changes over nothing—some identity, amirite?"

The look on her face was funny, but there was a strange logic to what she was saying. *Hey, for real? Yeah, you're right. I'm just about ready to be convinced. The attitude you're giving me is a little irritating, though.*

"Dear Komachi, whyever are you talking like that to me? It's not very nice. Also, you're making a weird face," I told her in gentle tones, meaning to chide her for her sudden use of rough language.

I think Komachi was offended by my calling her weird. Her temple twitched. "…I'm imitating you," she retorted, sounding rather miffed.

"It's nothing like me…," I said, but it was true that I'd never paid much attention to my own characteristics. *Huh? Do I come off as that irritated?* This was a shocking truth to discover for the first time from an objective view. *Do I not seem more, like, intellectual, detached, and dark? No?*

Huh? That's so strange… Seriously? Ngh…

I was moaning in mild shock, when Komachi sat beside me on

the couch. “I dunno what happened, but it’s way too late for that twisted personality of yours to be fixed now. You’re Hachimanure, as always.” As she spoke, she prodded me with her foot where I still lay sprawled out at her feet. She really was treating me like poop. But her foot stopped right there. Resting her elbow on her knee and holding her hand, she looked down at me and giggled. “But Komachi likes you quite a bit anyway. Oh, and that was worth a lot of points, in Komachi terms!” she said and gave her ultimate Komachi smile at the end. Awww, the way she makes unnecessary remarks to hide her shyness might be somewhat similar to a certain someone.

“…Thanks for that. I like me quite a bit, too. And that was worth a lot of points, in Hachiman terms.”

“Come on…”

Ignoring Komachi’s exasperation, I stood up.

I’d finally come to a decision. I’d probably remember that day again the next evening and writhe in embarrassment again at the flashbacks.

But this was fine. That past was part of what made me who I was now, the person Komachi said she liked quite a bit. Don’t designate someone’s past a wound. This is what makes me charming.

And if he is such a charming guy, I’m sure I can come to love him.

X X X

It was the day after I’d been rolling around at home and come to accept things, in my own way.

I woke up at the same time as usual, ate breakfast, and rode my bicycle to school.

Or so was my intention, but as I approached the school, my pedaling kept slowing down, and in the end, I wound up sliding into the classroom barely on time.

…Nah, there’s no way after all. If I could wipe it all away in a day or two, I wouldn’t have ended up with this personality in the first place.

Without making excuses to anyone as I grumbled away in my

head, I kept my head facedown on my desk. I was just so, so embarrassed. I was being extremely careful not to approach Yuigahama.

But still, she must have been a little concerned about me, as our eyes met at chance moments before morning homeroom and then during class.

Every time, I immediately jerked my eyes away and pretended I was napping.

What the hell is this, what the hell is this…? I kept thinking with a fervor, sticking my open notebook to my face, like when you chant the name of the Buddha in sleep paralysis. During breaks, I aimlessly wandered out to the bathroom and the vending machine, and for lunch, I ate my meal in my usual place, muttering to myself the whole time, "It's cold, so cold."

But the clock was startlingly fast that day.

Before I knew it, classes were over.

Finally, this time had come.

But while I was dawdling away here, Yuigahama might finish chatting with Miura and Ebina and then come over to invite me to go with her. I'd rather she not. It'd be a little embarrassing.

Maybe Yuigahama had picked up on that, or she had her own reservations; she hadn't approached me during the day. But now that school was done, it would be a different matter.

I'd leave the classroom before that happened.

I ambled down the hallway from the school building to the special-use building.

Frankly, my legs were far heavier now than the day back in middle school when my feelings for my crush had been rejected. Thinking back on it, I'd had an idea of how she would react, so that would have made me less anxious. Either people would have a good laugh at my expense, or she'd try to act cheerful and normal with me in an attempt to make it look like she wasn't bothered by it, but her smiles would be very strained, and she'd utterly fail in the attempt. I got the feeling it was uncommon to be completely ignored.

That sort of preestablished fake harmony would have been easier.

But I couldn't predict how Yukinoshita or Yuigahama would react.

Preoccupied with my self-reflection, I reached the clubroom

before I knew it. I'd tried to walk fairly slowly. Had it always been so close? Normally, I would take at least one glance out the window, but my attention wasn't on other matters today.

Standing in front of the clubroom, I sighed.

…*I wanna go home*, I thought. But I was the one who'd requested their help. Turning back now was not an option.

Steeling myself, I pulled open the clubroom door.

The door wasn't locked, and the sun was still high, so daylight filled the clubroom. The curtains were opened. The unused desks and chairs were in stacks, but our three chairs and the desk were still there, unchanged. And Yukinoshita sat there, in one of the chairs.

She looked up from the book she'd been reading. With the same composed look as always, she said, "Hello."

"Uh—uh-huh."

Her reaction was more normal than I'd expected. A bit anticlimactic, really. I guess sometimes something will worry you, while everyone else thinks nothing of it. That's archetypal excessive self-consciousness.

A little relieved, I sat down in the chair diagonal from her and pulled a paperback out of my bag. I opened it up to my bookmarked page, but I couldn't remember at all what I'd been reading. Going back over the page, finally, I found a familiar line.

It seemed it'd be the first substantial reading time in a while.

Yukinoshita and I passed a quiet, wordless time. Occasionally, I heard the sound of turning pages or a throat clearing. But when the throat clearing happened several times in a row, of course that caught my attention. I looked over to see Yukinoshita clearing her throat one more time before opening her mouth. "Um."

Perhaps trying to hide the slight crack in her voice, she cleared her throat again. Then she gave me an examining look, and when our eyes met, she jerked her gaze away. "…Um, about today. Could you tell me the time and place?"

Oh yeah. I'd missed my moment to speak when I came in, but I'd requested the Service Club help with the Christmas event. So I needed to fill them in. But we were still missing one person. It would be wrong to start without her. "Oh yeah… Can we do that once Yuigahama's here?"

"…Of course. You'd have to explain twice, wouldn't you?" Yukinoshita said quietly, dropping her gaze to her book. After that,

she fell silent, and I didn't particularly say anything, either. It seemed silence would fall for a little while more.

But that silence shattered with the sound of the door being slapped open.

"Yahallo!" Yuigahama exclaimed, full of energy as she came in.

"…Hey."

"Hello."

When we both responded to her greeting, Yuigahama smiled in satisfaction and headed for her usual seat. When she got there, she considered a bit, then dragged her chair over to Yukinoshita. It seemed those chairs were actually far lighter than I had thought.

Once she'd adjusted her chair's position, she chuckled and sat down.

"…You're very close," Yukinoshita muttered uncomfortably, and then she shifted her chair away slightly. But Yuigahama just chased her, moving her chair that much closer.

"…Um, Yuigahama… Could you move away?" Yukinoshita asked hesitantly, and Yuigahama's expression clouded. She inched her chair away again, then laid her hands on her lap, head drooping.

"Oh…yeah, of course…"

"Um, that's not really what I…" Yukinoshita started to say something when she saw Yuigahama's reaction, but then she fell silent.

There was some clear lingering tension in their exchange. It was emotionally exhausting to witness.

Well, those superficial interactions had gone on for some time, and they had argued the day before. Maybe it'd be difficult to be friends again like before right away. I'm talking about it like it's not my business here, but I didn't know the right way to deal with them, either.

Now, I had no clue what was right, but nevertheless, I wanted to believe this was a little more alive than that cold time had been. For now, I had to do what I had to do.

Searching for the right moment to address them, I cleared my throat a few times, too.

X X X

After I gave the girls a rough summary of the joint Christmas event and our present situation, we headed for the community center on schedule.

Within the clubroom and on the way to the meeting, we only had businesslike conversations. In terms of the word count, I bet it was higher back when we were having those superficial conversations.

I pushed my bicycle while the two walked along behind me. After a while, we saw Isshiki at the community center entrance. It seemed she was waiting for me today.

I left my bike in the bicycle parking and walked over to Isshiki. When she noticed us, she looked surprised, and her eyes went back and forth between the three of us. “Yui and Yukinoshita…? Wh-what’s going on?”

“Oh. I asked them to help,” I stated very briefly, then went inside the community center. Isshiki nodded, following me inside, while Yukinoshita and Yuigahama took up the rear.

“Oh, I see… Oh, um, that’s a real big help!” Isshiki smiled brightly at the other two girls.

Yuigahama replied with a “Yahallo!” and a smile. “I’m glad to be doing this with you, Iroha-chan,” she said.

Yukinoshita, beside her, agreed with a nod. “I hear things aren’t going well.”

“Yeahhh, they aren’t,” Isshiki said as she handed me a convenience store bag.

She gets used to things fast, but I just accepted the rapid change.

Yuigahama’s and Yukinoshita’s feet stopped right there.

“…”

“…”

Because they had stopped so suddenly, I turned around and saw the two of them staring at that convenience store bag. Yuigahama was gaping at it in astonishment, while Yukinoshita’s gaze on it was icy.

“What…?” I asked. Yukinoshita looked away, while Yuigahama gave me a laugh with a small wave in front of her chest.

“Oh, nothing.”

“Oh, uh-huh. Yeah, yeah, nothing.”

Feeling those uncomfortable gazes on me, I ascended the stairs. Yuigahama was taking it all in with curious “Ohhh”s, while

Yukinoshita walked with calm disinterest.

Then we arrived in the lecture room where the meeting would be held.

“Hiii, everyone!” With a casual greeting to the people there, Isshiki went in, and we followed after her. Attention gathered on Yukinoshita and Yuigahama.

Isshiki scooted over to Tamanawa to discuss something. She was probably telling him that a couple more people had come to help, or something like that. Tamanawa responded with an easygoing nod.

In the meantime, I thumped down the convenience store bag on an empty seat and briskly opened it up. Seeing this, Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, and the student council came to help me out.

Then, when Yuigahama was pouring the drinks, she gave a quiet “Ah.” When I followed her gaze, I found Orimoto. She stared back at us, eyes widening.

Oh yeah, I completely forgot Orimoto was here… Wondering how she would react to seeing me again, I got a little worried.

But she didn’t come over, just offered a casual bow. Yuigahama hurriedly bobbed her head back while Yukinoshita stared at her.

Well, not one of them has a good impression of the others… They didn’t even know where their own relationship stood, so there was no way they could consider Orimoto, too. Frankly speaking, they already had their hands full.

“I guess we should sit…,” Yuigahama said to us.

“Oh yeah.”

“Of course.”

Yukinoshita and I nodded, and when I sat down in my usual spot, Yuigahama took a seat beside me, while Yukinoshita sat where Isshiki had always been sitting. Of course Miss Yukinoshita would naturally take a seat at the head of the table.

But when Isshiki came back, she was confused. “H-huh? My seat…,” she murmured, hovering around Yukinoshita.

Noticing her, Yukinoshita started to get up. “Oh, I’m sorry. You all have designated seats, don’t you?”

“Oh. No, no, no, it’s fine, it’s fine! I’ll be comfortable over there,” Isshiki said, stopping Yukinoshita as she took the open seat beside the vice president.

When Tamanawa saw that everyone was seated, he came over to his usual post as the would-be moderator and opened his

MacBook Air, taking note of the faces present. “Is everyone here? Then let’s begin.” He greeted everyone with a “Thank you for coming” and a bow, and the meeting commenced.

That day for sure we’d decide what we would do for the Christmas event…or that was the plan. I’d emphasized this to Tamanawa beforehand, and we’d also had a day’s break in between. If we didn’t decide now, this really would be out of hand.

The one to get things started was, of course, our aspiring chairman Tamanawa. He addressed the Kaihin student council and distributed printouts. “After our brainstorming the other day, I considered things a bit on my own and made an outline. Please look it over.”

It seemed he’d canceled the meeting the day before in order to make this. The outline was titled *Christmas Concert Event* in a cheery font. Below, the content of the plan was listed. I think this was more like a proposal than an outline, but I decided not to nitpick and quietly read along instead.

It was a concert event with the concept “music connecting us now,” encompassing wide-ranging genres of music. It featured a five-part composition of concerts for classical, rock, jazz, hymns, and gospel music, and between each concert would be a Christmas-themed play, including a musical using the usual holiday songs. It was an all-genre Christmas event to exhibit the synergy of music and theater to the fullest.

…I did a general skim of it, then read it once more in depth. But what was written there didn’t change.

Come on, this is beyond a compromise plan—it’s a chimera. All it does is incorporate every idea that came up.

I figured what was described as an orchestra for the classical music on the meeting records was an issue of scale. I didn’t really understand the difference between hymns and gospel, but he’d deliberately written them separately, so I assumed they were different… The rest of the ideas had basically been thrown in there as suggested, and at a glance, it did look like an actual proposal.

But the result of incorporating all those opinions was that this plan was massive. Although I couldn’t say this could never work, it didn’t seem realistic.

“What do you think?” Tamanawa asked no one in particular, and everyone’s reactions were things like “Hmm, I think it’ll be good,” or “This looks like fun,” or “This’ll be exciting.” They spoke

positively, but not at all expressing complete agreement.

Were they only offering half-hearted, vague agreement because we weren't allowed to reject ideas during all the brainstorming? Or because nobody had been examining this seriously?

But at this rate, nothing would get decided. We had to be realistic, point out elements that were impossible to realize, and get ready to cut something.

"This is too big," I said. "And is there anyone here who can play music?"

"Yeah, we'll consider outsourcing, too." Tamanawa had anticipated that question and had his answer ready. "For classical and jazz, there are services you can hire for private concerts, and for the band, we have people at our school who can provide their talents. As for the plays and musical, if we request the cooperation of the theater club, I think it'll work out somehow. For the gospel… a church, I guess?"

His reply was a prime example of his tendency to leave problems to other people. *Can we even call it our event anymore…?*

I don't think asking someone else to handle things is bad. It's often better to leave it to the people with actual skills rather than making a poor attempt at things that aren't your specialty. If we could leave it to someone else and have it work out, I really didn't mind.

The other question was just how realistic this plan was. Thinking back on the date on the calendar, I asked, "So do you have the schedule of those services for hire?" I didn't think they'd simply come right over if we went to them the day before. I mean, those sorts of businesses are busy around the Christmas season, I'm sure.

"We can start checking over that now."

Uh, you should have already checked that first… Clearly, this was far more useless than a picture of a mochi. This was as useless as an illustration of a moe character who's the anthropomorphization of mochi named "Mochimi-chan" (with huge boobs).

Tamanawa must have seen the look on my face. "First, I would seek a consensus from everyone. I share the grand design, and then we can circle back to deep dive on where to trim the fat."

"Trim…the fat?" Yuigahama tilted her head. Well, we could explain that terminology to her later. For now, the important thing was to do something about the meeting.

This time, I'd attack from a different angle.

“But, like, is this youth-minded? I feel like this is different from the intent of our original plan.”

“That’s why the theme includes *now*. I think we should show them high school kids *now*, presenting an out-of-the-box paradigm shift in the stereotypical conception of high schoolers.”

“Out of…? Para…? Conception?” Yuigahama tilted her head yet again.

Well, we could explain the terminology to her later… *Wait, you know* conception.

Anyway, assuming we’d explain to Yuigahama to later, the problem was Tamanawa. Frankly, I felt like *Look at reality* was enough of a counterargument, but telling that to someone who refuses to face actual facts wouldn’t amount to anything.

About all we could do was gently attempt to push him toward surrender by presenting realistic walls and hurdles that were out of our control.

I had my cards ready.

I pulled out the tentative budget I’d put together the other day and had already given Tamanawa. All the hiring expenses for the concert were compiled there. While carefully confirming those figures in detail, I asked Tamanawa, “If we’re hiring an outside party, then what about the budget?”

I recalled from the tentative budget I’d handed in earlier that the typical market rate for one performer was about thirty or forty thousand yen per hour. And if you needed one each for classical and jazz, that would be double the fee. And then if you were to increase the number of performers further, there would be a corresponding increase in expense. And then the gospel would be another fee on top of that, and it would certainly cost quite a bit. Our current budget would obviously not be enough to accommodate everything on this proposal.

But Tamanawa’s answer didn’t change from before. “The point of this meeting is to consider solutions to these problems.”

If he was going to be like that, then there was nothing more I could say.

It wasn’t as if the plan Tamanawa had put forth was bad. If we’d had enough time, manpower, and funds, then it would have worked. This plan wasn’t a total impossibility.

But given the current situation, we were lacking in all three of those resources.

When I fell silent, no one else made any counterarguments, either, and the meeting moved on to a discussion of how to realize this plan and how to procure the funds.

After firming up the matter of the funds, they'd probably settle on how to shave down the content. But I think most likely, by the time they came to that decision, there'd be no more time, and they'd have to reduce the content even more.

I could imagine this future so easily. I breathed a little sigh.

X X X

Once we got through the meeting, I was exhausted.

In the end, we still hadn't even decided what exactly we were going to do for the event, and the meeting had turned into a deliberation on carrying things forward. Not only was it less than a week until Christmas, the following day was Saturday. At this point in the game, the weekend was a pretty painful loss of time.

Beside me, Yukinoshita was disheartened, too. She gently brought her hand to her temple as if she had a headache and breathed a sigh. "This is worse than I imagined… It's been like this the whole time?"

"…Yeah." Well, it had actually been a little worse than this. The appearance of concrete nouns meant that considerable progress had been made. I chuckled a little spitefully, thinking about it.

"You couldn't even engage in a proper discussion. Just watching was irritating…," Yukinoshita said, aggravated.

Yuigahama responded with a tired nod. "Yeah… It feels like they won't listen at all."

But Tamanawa wasn't that kind of guy. Having dealt with him all this time, I knew that well. "I wish it was just that… He half listens and then just adds stuff, and that steers everything further off course."

"Ahhh, yeah. He does do that…," Isshiki agreed with a sigh.

In an attempt to break the heavy atmosphere, Yuigahama turned back to me with a renewed burst of enthusiasm. "So then what should we do?"

"…No idea," I answered honestly. Frankly, part of me had been thinking that with luck, if we could decide everything in the

meeting that day with a burst of effort, it'd work out. Even if we couldn't resolve everything, there'd still be a little bit of progress. But pop off the cap, and you got this.

When I was considering what to do, Yukinoshita gave me a close look and muttered, "…So you *don't* know everything."

"What? Are you being sarcastic? Of course there's lots of things I don't know," I retorted automatically, like the last time, and Yukinoshita was struck silent.

"That's not what I meant, um…" She turned away from me as she gently bit her lip. She dropped her gaze. Before, this exchange would have been nothing, but now it was awkward. I couldn't get a good grasp on where we stood with each other.

It was too uncomfortable, and I scratched hard at my head. "… No, sorry. I want to do something, but I really don't know."

"…I'm not trying to blame you," she replied quietly, head still drooping.

Watching us, Yuigahama timidly cut in. "A-anyway, for now, let's start by thinking about what we can do. Right?"

Yukinoshita lifted her head. "You're right." Then she lightly folded her arms and touched her hand to her chin. That pose must have helped her gather her thoughts, as she slowly began to talk it through. "I think the first thing to consider is narrowing this event down to something feasible, but…"

"Yeah…but still, with things as they are…," Isshiki said, remembering the earlier meeting. Reducing the scale of the event was not an option with this crew.

Yukinoshita must have thought the same after witnessing the process herself. She nodded back at Isshiki. "Well, then we must think about additional funds. If we're going to hire someone to perform for us, then securing those funds is imperative, and if we're going to have a student band, then securing a place and practice time is urgent. The music room can be used for practice, but if it's not available, then we'll have to borrow a studio, and that will incur more fees."

Now that she said it, I realized—oh, it wasn't just the expenses on the day of. We also had to take initial costs into calculation…

"That raises the budget even higher…," I muttered.

And we still hadn't decided what we were going to do, either, so we couldn't even make the calculations. We were completely stuck.

While I was in my own head, Yukinoshita continued. “I suppose what comes next will be a discussion of how to secure the funds. Either we have the school pay, or we split the bill among ourselves. There’s also the option of searching for another sponsor somewhere, but that seems unlikely, time-wise.”

“Yeah, since we have less than a week left.” This deadline would be harsher than I’d thought. With this schedule, it didn’t seem we could work something out, even if we had decided on a plan.

“Realistically speaking, this should come from student council funds, but I doubt we’ll be able to secure that, with this proposal and plan…” Yukinoshita looked at the outline Tamanawa had just handed out, scratching in things and drawing lines on it with a red pen. In the blink of an eye, the outline was red all over with corrections and notes.

Yuigahama let out a “Whoa” with a look of respect as she watched Yukinoshita at work, while Isshiki flinched away, watching her with fear and awe in her eyes.

Well, I could get that. In no time at all, Yukinoshita had organized the issue and was proposing a concrete plan. Amazing, as always. I doubted there was anyone else there who could surpass Yukinoshita when it came to seeing through business like this.

But it seemed that even she couldn’t come up with a solution that easily, as she drew a big *X* over a note she’d written and breathed a shallow sigh. “But I don’t think that’s the issue. There’s something more fundamental…”

It seemed she wasn’t convinced herself, but from where I stood, that was enough progress. At the very least, we had something to focus on now.

“For now, let’s just handle the task they’ve handed us. First, we talk to the school about money and check whether they can add some extra funds,” I said and stood.

Yukinoshita looked up at me with slight unease. It was unusual to see her looking unsure, and it confused me a little. “Wh-what is it?” I asked.

She jerked her head away. “Oh, no… If this is all, I thought you would have come up with it, too.”

“No, I hadn’t formed a concrete plan.”

“I see… All right, then,” she said and stood.

Anyway, first thing is pestering ’em for cash… Money’s the first

thing we have to decide, huh? Even though it's Christmas. So much for seasonal spirit…

X X X

We left the supervision of the elementary school kids and the updating of the meeting records to the student council, while our Service Club trio plus Isshiki returned to the school. We had to talk to Miss Hiratsuka about everything, since she was the one who was supervising this joint event.

Entering the staff room, I headed for Miss Hiratsuka's spot, where she was doing some kind of paperwork at her desk.

…This is unusual. When I go to her, she's always eating food or watching anime.

"Miss Hiratsuka," I addressed her, and she looked up.

Then she turned to me, as well as Yukinoshita and Yuigahama behind me, and smiled broadly. "Hikigaya. Looks like you've done your homework."

That remark seemed to stun Yuigahama, and she blinked. "Homework?"

"We haven't gotten any homework for Japanese class," I told her. *Please stop inviting misunderstandings.*

Yuigahama sighed in relief. "Of course, phew! You startled me, there!"

Miss Hiratsuka smiled pleasantly and spun her chair around to face us. "Anyway…did you need something?"

"Yes… Isshiki, explain for her," said Yukinoshita.

"Huh?! Me?!" Isshiki had not been paying attention at all until her name was introduced. She gaped in dramatic shock.

"This is your responsibility, isn't it?" Yukinoshita flicked a rather sharp glance at her.

"Urk…," Isshiki moaned.

I—I wonder if she'll be okay. It's a little late for this, but I'm worried about their relationship. Maybe I should help her out…, I was thinking when Isshiki took a step forward.

"Ummm. Miss Hiratsuka, we need to ask you something…"

"Hmm, let's hear it."

So Isshiki summarized events, the proposal that had been made,

and the pending issue of money. Yukinoshita filled in where necessary, where information was missing or unclear.

Once we'd finished catching up Miss Hiratsuka, she leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs. "So first, the budget, eh…?"

"Yeah," I replied.

"Hmm." Miss Hiratsuka nodded and said, "It seems you kids don't understand what Christmas is all about."

"Huh?" When I tilted my head in a silent question, the teacher clapped her hands as if she'd come up with something.

"Then I'll show you," she said, and she grabbed the bag sitting on the side of her desk and rummaged around inside it. Then she pulled something out. "This!" She waved some weird pieces of paper. "Ta-daa!"

The corners were folded and twisted, but looking closely, they seemed to be some kind of tickets.

"Those are tickets for Destiny Land, aren't they…?" Yukinoshita knew them at a glance.

Now that she mentioned it, looking closely, I saw they were decorated with little illustrations of Ginnie the Grue.

Huh, oh yeah, they did look like that. By the way, the tickets you use for entrance aren't called tickets. Destiny Land calls itself the "land of dreams," so the ticket needed for entrance is called a passport. They're really detail-oriented like that.

Yuigahama looked up at the tickets. "Ohhh. Why do you have these? And there's four…"

In response, Miss Hiratsuka set the tickets down and chuckled with an unpleasant smile. "Yeah, I won them at a wedding after-party…and twice… 'You can go alone twice!' they told me. Twice…"

Hearing that, my eyes just about overflowed with tears.

Hey! How could they say such a thing! Of course Miss Hiratsuka would go four times and then, after she had way more fun than she expected, would pay herself to go a fifth time—obviously! Worst case, on her sixth time, I'd even go with her. Seriously, there's gonna be all sorts of problems if someone doesn't marry her soon.

As I gazed at Miss Hiratsuka with teary eyes, she stuck a cigarette in her mouth and chewed at the filter. "I'll give you these, so go study up on the place a little. Christmas is great at Destiny Land, so it should be a useful reference. Besides…it'll be a good break for you." She cracked a smile at us.

Well, it was true that there was nothing we could do now. If we used this for both data collecting and as a break, it wouldn't be completely useless.

But wouldn't it be a more effective use of these tickets to just convert them into money…? I wondered, but beside me, Isshiki and Yuigahama were excitedly exclaiming "Oooh!" so I couldn't say it out loud.

"Can we really? Thank you so much!" Isshiki was gleeful.

But I really wasn't. And the reason for that popped out of my mouth. "Why at a time when it's so damn crowded…?"

"Yes, I would rather not…" Yukinoshita nodded in agreement. Well, she doesn't seem the type to enjoy loud places and crowds.

But some people liked the feeling of a festival; Yuigahama looked put out by our remarks. "Whaaat? Why not? Let's go!"

"You underestimate Destiny Land in winter," I said. "The winds are cold and bitter. It's right by the ocean, you know."

Yukinoshita added, "And it's also crowded and filled with long lines."

But Yuigahama didn't back down. "Huh…? Ah! But, but…Grue-bear! There's Grue's Bamboo Hunt! You know, before when we watched that DVD, you said you'd like to go!"

Yukinoshita reacted with a twitch to the word *Grue-bear*. Her head turned jerkily to the side, as if her neck were a rusty joint. "… Why go to the trouble of picking a crowded season when I can go any time?"

Seeing her discomfort, Yuigahama seized the chance to press further. "Come on, come on! Since it's Christmas, won't it be made all Christmassy? Like they do for the Spooky Manor and stuff."

"No, this year, the Bamboo Hunt is as usual. And it's never been done in Christmas style before—since in the first place, the attraction emphasizes world aesthetic," Yukinoshita replied flatly, eyes sparkling and flashing in response to Yuigahama's offensive. Her tone of voice was more intense than usual. If you're gonna talk Grue-bear with Yukinoshita, you gotta get it right, I guess…

Yukinoshita's forceful reply kept Yuigahama from any reply other than "Urk." Beside her, Isshiki was weirded out, while Miss Hiratsuka watched with deep interest. Though I was already aware of Yukinoshita's love for Ginnie the Grue, I was a little weirded out, too, and I couldn't help but comment. "You know a lot about this…"

“It’s common knowledge,” Yukinoshita said, jerking her head away. Her pink cheeks indicated she was embarrassed about her impassioned speech.

And hey, in what land is that common knowledge? The land of dreams?

Even after being completely argued down, Yuigahama still didn’t give up, tug-tugging at Yukinoshita’s sleeve. “Let’s go!”

“Absolutely not.” The matter of Grue-bear must have had the opposite effect, and Yukinoshita was adamant.

Gradually, Yuigahama’s voice weakened, too, but her hand holding Yukinoshita’s sleeve squeezed harder. “…I want to go with you, Yukinon. I mean, because of all that stuff lately. And we have this chance…”

Yukinoshita’s head suddenly dropped.

Before, Yukinoshita would have instantly capitulated to this sort of request, but now she was struggling. She didn’t know how to deal with it.

…So it won’t go that easy after all.

I was reminded that what was lost will not come back.

Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, and I couldn’t figure out how close to be with one another.

Maaan, these people are such a pain in the butt! Especially me!

I was the one who’d caused this mess in the first place, so I’d take responsibility for that at least.

I scratched roughly at my head and mobilized all my knowledge of Destiny Land.

You can’t underestimate my Chiba data. Having a particularly keen mind for all things Chiba is what I’m all about. And Tokyo Destiny Land is included in that. When you get to be a Chibanese of my level, you can answer the question “Is Destiny Land in Tokyo? Or Chiba?” in falsetto: “It’s the land of dreams! Ha-ha! ♪” By the way, the correct answer to that trivia question is Chiba.

While pulling out my knowledge of Chiba and Destiny Land, a light bulb turned on over my head. “Merch.”

“Huh?” Yukinoshita tilted her head.

“Aren’t they selling a Christmas version of Grue-bear? I’d like to pick out something like that for Komachi’s Christmas present…”

The promise of merch alone might not be enough; it was always possible Yukinoshita already had a complete set. Seasonal limited items and choosing a present should make the excuse work better.

Yuigahama must have picked up on what I was going for, as her face shone. “Oh, that’s a good idea! Let’s all pick something out for her!” She grabbed Yukinoshita’s hand in both of her own.

Yukinoshita gave up resisting and went slack with a sigh. “…If that’s the plan, then, well, I suppose I have no choice.”

“Yeah!”

Yukinoshita looked upon Yuigahama’s innocent glee with a smile, then suddenly turned to me. Looking a little serious, she asked, “Does Komachi like Ginnie the Grue?”

“Huh? Uh, I guess…”

“I see. I didn’t know. Then that makes choosing a little difficult…,” she said, looking somehow glad. Maybe she was thinking she’d made a Grue-bear friend.

…Whoops. I’d just come up with a reason offhand, but maybe I should tell Komachi to study up on Grue-bear… W-well, Komachi can go along with her conversation somehow! I believe in her! I think if she screwed up some Grue-bear trivia, Yukinoshita would probably get really mad at her, but Komachi will be okay! Big Brother believes in you!

As I was mentally apologizing to Komachi, I heard a low moan of *muuurg*. I looked over to see Isshiki making duck lips and eyeing us with lowered lids.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, but she turned her head away as if she wasn’t interested.

“Oh, nothiiing. I was just wondering if something was up.” Then, as if a thought had struck her suddenly, she gasped, “Ah!” and turned back to us. “But, like, all four of us would go, right?”

Now that she pointed it out, she was right. We had four tickets, so it’d be natural for all of us to go, but if you really thought about it, I would be in a pretty unfavorable position as the only guy… When I gave Miss Hiratsuka a look that said, *Can’t I avoid this?* she smirked at me.

“Well, this is for you to collect data, so that would be appropriate.”

“Well, but…”

When I tried to argue back, Yukinoshita folded her arms and tilted her head. “I have an annual passport, so we won’t need one of the tickets…”

An annual passport? Just how serious are you about that place…? Maybe I shouldn’t be surprised that someone with Yukinoshita’s

tendencies is so serious about chasing a mouse that she has a meownual pussport. Passport.

Hearing Yukinoshita had an annual passport, Isshiki was suddenly energized. “Oh, then we should invite one more person. It’d be more balanced!” She beamed, and I got a bad feeling.

“Who are you gonna call…?”

“That’s…a secret.” Sticking up her index finger, Isshiki winked. With how annoying she was being, even if she wasn’t going to answer the question, I got the feeling I knew who she wanted to invite.

X X X

The following day, Saturday, I set out in the morning.

It was for the purpose of the aforementioned data collection at Destiny Land. The train ride to Maihama Station, where we were meeting, was about twenty minutes long. This is the one time when people envy the Chibanese. People will enviously complain, *So Chiba people often hold their coming-of-age ceremonies at Destiny Land, huh?* but that’s only in Urayasu city. That’s got nothing to do with most Chibanese.

With these thoughts in my head, I was letting the train carry me along when out the window, the sight of the Destiny Land Resort came into view. I gave a small sigh of appreciation in spite of myself. Even if you’re not that interested in that stuff, when you see the white castle and that attraction with the active volcano that has smoke rising from it, you can’t help getting excited.

I arrived at my goal, Maihama Station, and got off the train in high spirits. There are even things in the station to get you excited: the incoming train jingle being a Destiny-related tune and a unique-shaped clock and such. It’s all a big show to let you know how much fun you’re about to have at Destiny.

As I cheerfully went through the gates, the spot where we’d be meeting was right before my eyes. I was glancing around wondering whether the others were there yet, when someone called out to me.

“Hikki, yahallo!”

Stop using that greeting when we’re in public… I didn’t have to check to know who it was. Looking over, I saw Yuigahama with a

pom-pom-bedecked knit cap, waving her arm wide.

She must have been pretty worked up for this, as she had her beige coat over her arm instead of wearing it. She was also wearing a long knit sweater, a longish scarf around her neck, and mittens on her hands. It seemed she'd come with proper protection against the chill. But even though she was wearing leggings, her miniskirt looked a little cold for the weather. She was also wearing fluffy-looking short boots, though, so maybe it balanced out.

Yukinoshita, on the other hand, was standing beside her wearing her white coat properly, with the collar up. Her black gloves were furred, and her plaid scarf looked warm, too. Her pleated skirt was also a little on the short side, but she was also wearing black tights and tall boots, so you didn't get the impression she was cold.

"Hey, you're early," I called out to them, going up to the information board where the two of them were standing.

"Arriving five minutes early is a basic tenet of social etiquette," Yukinoshita said carelessly, and Yuigahama nodded a couple times.

"That's right; Yukinon came early. I'd thought I'd come pretty early, too, but she was the very first."

"…I didn't want to be on a crowded train," Yukinoshita said, jerking her head away. Her black hair shifted over her white coat, striking a nice contrast.

She must have been really looking forward to coming to Destiny Land. She's so serious…

Well anyway, now all three of us were there. "Guess we're just waiting for Isshiki, then," I said.

"Oh, she's over there."

I looked over to where Yuigahama pointed, and that was right when Isshiki came out of the station convenience store. There was someone coming out after her, too. It was Hayato Hayama.

…Well, I'd expected that. This was Isshiki. She must have cried and begged and used everything at her disposal to get him to come.

The five of us would probably spend the day going around together.

Or so I thought, when Miura emerged from behind Hayama. And then behind her were even Tobe and Ebina.

I rubbed my eyes, then checked again.

Yuigahama and Yukinoshita ⟵ I get it.

Isshiki and Hayama ⟵ I sorta get it.

Miura, Tobe, and Ebina ← I have no idea.

What's going on here…?

"Hey, why are they here, too…?" I looked over at Yukinoshita and Yuigahama in search of an explanation. Yukinoshita's gaze slid over to Yuigahama, whose shoulders twitched.

"U-um…" Avoiding eye contact with Yukinoshita, Yuigahama rubbed aggressively at the pom-pom on her knit cap. It looked like she was using it in place of her usual bun. "I—I mean, we were planning on hanging out in the first place… B-besides, I couldn't be the only one on Iroha-chan's side! I was stuck between a rock and a hard place!" She held her head in her hands. Yukinoshita breathed a short sigh.

I wanted to sigh, too, but first, there was something I should say. I gave Yuigahama a sharp look. She was holding her head and moaning. "Don't bring them along without asking. Can you make sure they're taken care of?"

"I—I can!" she said, jerking her head up.

Then Yukinoshita opened her mouth. "So then I'm sure it's fine. I doubt we'll be all that involved with their clique, regardless."

"Yukinon…" Yuigahama was looking at Yukinoshita with admiration, but, uh, that was just like a declaration that she was washing her hands of this…

"Maybe you're right…," I said, but something else there was bothering me. I figured I should bring that up, too, just in case. "Yuigahama… Don't take on more than you have to, like helping Isshiki with her crush."

"Oh yeah… Yeah, but…," she said, her expression darkening as she looked at the ground.

We weren't yet at the point where we could be sticking our noses into other people's business like that. We'd only make all sorts of mistakes. This was the one thing I had to make sure to tell her.

Yuigahama fiddled anxiously with her knit hat as if there was something on her mind. Her gaze was still lowered, but looking at her, I could tell she understood.

"…Well, what's done is done, and they're here now. They'll be perfect for helping out with data collection and taking pictures," I said, though I actually wasn't counting on them for much.

Yuigahama lifted her head. "Yeah…" She smiled, but it seemed a little forced.

Yukinoshita combed her hand through her hair and offered Yuigahama a faint smile. “If we’re going to be collecting data, then we should decide on a general course.”

Yuigahama broke into a sparkling grin. “Oh, right! So what do we ride first?”

“Well, that, I guess…” I looked over at the train stopped at the Keiyo Line platform.

“A train? You wanna go home already?!”

As we were talking, Isshiki and the others came to join up with us. “Good morning!”

“Uh-huh.” I responded casually to her greeting.

Beside her, Hayama smiled gently as he addressed me. “…’Sup.”

“Hey…” The words we exchanged were brief. But we made plenty of eye contact to make up the difference. I made an attempt to ascertain what lurked behind that smile of his. I got the feeling he was trying to see something inside me, too.

As I was entertaining these thoughts, suddenly, I felt a shiver down my spine.

Ah! Bloodlust! No—just lust?! Feeling a suspicious presence, I spun around to see Ebina giving a slasher smile. But when her eyes met mine, she smothered her *fujoshi* aura and waved her hand cheerfully.

“Huh? Hikio’s here?” Miura poked her head out from behind Ebina.

Tobe, beside her, burst into loud laughter. “Ba-ha! Ah, man, Yumiko, Hikio? I’m dying. That’s Hikitani.”

Both of those are wrong, though…

“Well, it looks like everyone’s here, so let’s go.” Isshiki spun around to look at everyone, and we all started walking.

We lined up at the entrance, then converted our tickets to passes as we went in through the front gate.

When we came out into a space that looked like a square, I couldn’t help but make an impressed sound.

From the gates, we could see a massive Christmas tree lit up ahead, while Western-style buildings lined the main street to the white castle in the background. It was just like in a movie. Right there was the kind of spectacle you’d see in a Christmas-themed movie. A number of movies rose in my mind, but for some reason, the one that hit me the strongest was *Home Alone 2*. That’s so

strange; I thought I'd seen a lot of others, too…

Data collection was supposed to be a part of this, so I pulled my digital camera out of my jacket and snapped away at the shutter.

Meanwhile, the girls were squeeing as they went to wait in the photo line in front of the tree. Yukinoshita was with them, too, looking a little bewildered next to Yuigahama. It seemed she wasn't used to that sort of environment. Of course, since the guys and Hayama were there, they were also forced to join the line.

And even louder than the boisterous girls was Tobe. He lined up behind them, looked at the tree, and yelled, "Whoa! This tree's awesome! I'm gettin' excited now!"

Hayama watched him with a wry smile.

After some waiting, finally, it was our turn to take pictures. They didn't have to handle it themselves; the park staff would take photos for you.

After they all took one photo together, they took more in various combinations, like just the girls; Hayama, Miura, and Isshiki together; and Yukinoshita and Yuigahama beside each other. Watching it reminded me of mathematical sets and sequences.

Finally, they finished taking photos and I started walking off, thinking we could move along, when Yuigahama approached me with her phone in hand. "Sorry to make you wait, Hikki."

Yukinoshita was sighing next to her, probably exhausted from the photo taking. Or did her soul get sucked out?

Then Yuigahama tugged her along by the hand. She yanked my scarf, too, and the surprise attack made me stagger. Her face was close. Across from me, Yukinoshita looked surprised, too.

I heard a shutter go off multiple times. One was from Yuigahama's phone, while another was from Ebina, standing off to the side.

"I got it, Yui!"

"Th-thanks!" Yuigahama took the camera from Ebina, then tapped away at the buttons to confirm the image.

"…Yuigahama."

"Don't do that without asking…," I said at the same time as Yukinoshita. Yukinoshita's eyebrows had twitched into a scowl, and she looked kind of mad.

But Yuigahama acted like that was nothing. "But if I asked, you two wouldn't let me take one," she nonchalantly declared.

"Nah, I would." In fact, I'd even prefer it if she'd told me. If I

could've gotten emotionally ready, I'm sure I could have looked better in that shot. I felt like my face was red there, and it was really embarrassing.

"…That's still no reason to take one without asking." Yukinoshita sighed.

Yuigahama must have felt really bad about that, as she drooped. "S-sorry. I'll make sure to tell you next time."

"…There won't be a next time." Though there was a smile on Yukinoshita's face, her voice was particularly cold. After that remark, she strode off ahead quickly.

"I-I'm sorry, Yukinon! Yukinon, wait!" Yuigahama hurried after her.

Yukinoshita's pace gradually slowed down, until eventually, they started walking side by side.

I watched them from about two steps behind.

They'd finally settled into a comfortable distance again, I think.

X X X

Space Universe Mountain. It's like a mountain, but in space.

We went to line up for one of the three big roller coasters, the mountain of space.

When we came up in front of the dome on the Mountain, as they call it, Yukinoshita folded her arms and tilted her head. "This place doesn't feel much like Christmas, so I'm not sure it will be much of a reference…"

As was typical for serious Yukinoshita, it seemed she was keeping in mind the reason we'd come that day, data collection for reference for the event.

However, Yuigahama didn't seem to be thinking that deeply, and she pointed over beside the dome. "Oh, but look…there are wreaths and stuff decorating it over there… Let's get in line!"

"You can see those anywhere…"

It was true the Christmas wreaths Yuigahama was pointing at were common in Destiny Land. They were all over the place, in fact, and she was completely forcing this. She obviously just wanted to ride the Mountain.

Oh well. Miss Hiratsuka did say this was also supposed to be a break, so it wouldn't be an awful idea…

Yuigahama looked at Yukinoshita with puppy-dog eyes, and eventually, Yukinoshita gave in with a sigh. "…Agh, I'll go with you just once."

Then Isshiki turned around from her spot in line ahead of us. "Well, but either way, I think we can only ride each thing once, so that should be fine, riiight?"

"Oh really?"

"Yeah, I figured it would basically be best to get a broad look at everything."

Oh, is that what she was going for? Now I understood. Isshiki had been the one to come up with the course for the day.

After taking photos, we got on the Buccaneers of the Carabiner, then followed the crowd flow straight to get the fast pass for Large

Lightning Mountain, then we turned back around to come to the Futureplace zone. We'd probably wind up going to another zone, after this.

We of Chiba will often get pointlessly fixated about our route for riding attractions at Destiny Land, and we'll come up with the most efficient way of doing it that's in line with our goals. Part of this is just about having the experience, and it may be a consideration unique to the Chibanese, with our geographic advantage.

Yukinoshita had given in, so we joined the long line for the Mountain as well.

Waiting in front was Hayama's crowd, while at the very back was Yukinoshita and Yuigahama together. Since the seats for the Mountain coaster were in twos, people were also naturally lining up in pairs.

"Yukinon, let's ride together."

"A-all right… Will this be useful data?"

It seemed Yukinoshita and Yuigahama had already decided to ride together.

Yeah, I can't say if things are completely the same as before or not, but it looks like their relationship has reached equilibrium, at least.

Meanwhile, up front was a scene from hell.

Most people were lining up in twos, but we had one clear trio.

It was Hayama, with Miura and Isshiki on either side. The girls were both enthusiastically chatting with him, and with every remark, they'd each give the other brief, menacing glances. I was behind them, so I couldn't see Hayama's expression, but I suspected he was smiling uncomfortably.

Perhaps there was a Destiny effect going on, as Miura and Hayama's relationship didn't seem awkward.

And then there was one man behind them, moaning.

"What do I do, what do I do?!" Tobe was muttering to himself. But he seemed to make up his mind eventually, raising his head in determination as he charged for Hayama. "Haaayatooo! Let's ride together!" He mustered the energy to cut in between the three of them, where Miura and Isshiki both gave him a sharp look.

"Tobe, listen…" Miura scowled at him, while Isshiki smiled and delivered quite a blow.

"Tobe, you're in the way. ♩"

Whoa, the temperature over there is dropping below zero… Gives

me chills just watching…

But this time, Tobe didn't flinch away. He smacked his hands together to beg the two of them. "Ah, man, I mean, I'm kinda, like, y'know? I'm freaked out about the Mountain, for real. So like, for real, like, please on this one!"

""Huh?""

They were in such perfect unison that I wanted to tell them, *Nice coupling.* Unsurprisingly, Tobe yelped at that.

But someone stepped in to help him out. "Sure, Tobe. Let's ride together."

"Hayato…" Tobe clung to Hayama and kind of looked like he was about to pull a line like *Oh, friend of my heart!* while Miura was looking at them like, *Hayato's so nice…*

If you just saw this, Hayama did indeed look like a good guy, but with a bird's-eye view of the whole scene, that was not in fact the case. Hayama was the one being saved, and in a way, Miura and Isshiki were, too.

Tobe's a good guy… I think he's probably an even better guy in the movies, too.

While I was watching with admiration, Tobe's move up front caused Ebina to slide back. Then she suddenly smiled. "Looks like Tobecchi's having a bad time."

Though I wouldn't go so far as to say she was pretending to be an uninvolved bystander, it was clearly a statement made from a step away. Was she still the same as she had been during the school field trip? Did she still hold on to that feeling I know we shared then, for a moment?

Wanting to know, I found myself asking, "Yeah… Why don't you help him out?"

Ebina waffled a bit, then dropped her gaze to her feet. "Hmm…" But that was only for a moment, and when her face rose again, her glasses sparkled. "Eh-heh-heh, why don't you help him out instead, Hikitani, for some Tobe/Hachi? If I start now, I might be able to finish a flyer in time for Winter Comiket!"

"Please don't…"

"It's 'cause you say weird stuff, Hikitani," she replied coldly. Looking at her face, the glare on her lenses kept me from seeing the eyes behind them. "You have things you should be more concerned about than us, don't you?"

"…" I didn't even have to ask what she meant. That was why I

couldn't reply.

Even though she understood, she still added a joke. "For example, like Hayato!"

"No way. No," I denied instantly, and she laughed.

Then her smile faded, and her voice lowered. "…Sorry about back then."

"What?" I asked back, wondering what she was talking about all of a sudden.

In the quietest whisper, so as not to let those behind us hear, she said, "Is that the reason things have been so awkward with you guys?"

"…That's got nothing to do with it." The incident during the field trip was one trigger of many, and I figured something like this would have happened eventually. That wasn't Ebina's responsibility—it had ultimately been my own choice.

"All right, then."

"Are things not awkward with you?"

"…Nope, thanks to you." Ebina slid a finger up to adjust the position of her glasses. They hadn't been crooked, but still, she must have done something.

Ebina and I didn't really talk after that, standing in line quietly.

She had not necessarily spoken the truth.

That's something I learned through her request.

Now I knew that there are things you'll overlook, even when you think you know.

I'm sure Ebina had told yet another small lie.

X X X

When we got off the Mountain, I was wobbling. I hadn't felt it when I was whirling around the track at high speed, but now it was like gravity was returning all at once. *So this is the* Reconguista in G…

Of course, I was not the only one experiencing this sensation, although the others had it at different levels. Isshiki in particular was making a pathetic "Wahhh" noise as she staggered around.

As she did, someone firmly grabbed her hand.

"Th-thank you…" When Isshiki expressed her gratitude with a gentle smile, the one who'd taken her hand breathed an irritated

sigh.

"So, like, are you okay?"

"Oh, it was Miura…" Suddenly, Isshiki's smile evaporated.

Miura hastily shoved a plastic bottle at her. "Hey, you look real pale, okay? Need some water?"

"I'm fine, but… Thank you…," Isshiki said hesitantly, taken aback, and accepted the bottle from Miura.

…Miura's a good person.

Isshiki had probably been gunning for Hayama to be the one to baby her, but I guess that doesn't work when you've got Miura's mom-friend tendencies…

With Miura taking care of the staggering Isshiki, we got moving.

There were a lot of popular attractions in the Mountain area, which may have been why it was so exceptionally crowded. And there was one other person in the crowd who was staggering. Unable to overlook it, Yuigahama asked her, "Yukinon, are you okay?"

"I'm all right… I'm just a little overwhelmed by the crowds…"

Can you call that all right…*?* Well, I could understand the feeling. I was pretty sick of the crowds, too.

I was worried if she was okay, but by the time Yukinoshita arrived at our next goal point, she'd completely recovered.

Yes, I'm sure I don't need to tell you! The next attraction was Grue's Bamboo Hunt!

Just as Yukinoshita's prior information had told us, despite Destiny Land being at the height of Christmas spirit, there was nothing like that at the Bamboo Hunt, as if they were saying, *I don't care about that sort of thing! I care more about the Lunar New Year!* So it seemed there was absolutely nothing here that would be of reference for the event, but this time, Yukinoshita was lining up without a single complaint. *Okay, fine…*

The line was long, but when I used my special skill of zoning out hard, I wasn't that bothered by the wait time.

When we eventually got indoors, the heat made me sigh in relief.

"So who's going when?" Yuigahama asked, and Isshiki and Miura prepared for battle. Though Isshiki was indebted to her for her earlier care, it seemed she did not intend to surrender. Yet again, Tobe suddenly tensed.

But Tobe's concerns were needless. Looking at the gourd-shaped carts moving up ahead, it seemed this ride took groups of three or four.

So it was settled that Hayama, Isshiki, and Miura would be a group. While I was wondering how the remaining combos would work out, our turn was coming up.

Yukinoshita addressed Yuigahama. "Let's go."

"Yeah," Yuigahama replied, lining up beside her.

Well, of course. Yukinoshita had been doing everything with Yuigahama that day. So it was natural for the two of them to ride together for the Bamboo Hunt.

Then should I ride with Ebina and Tobe…? Aw man, naw, that'd be superawkward. Even if it had been a lie, they were basically the girl I'd confessed to and my rival in love. *I wonder if I'm allowed to ride this one alone. Tell me, Yukipedia!*

Yukinoshita briskly slipped into the ride. Yuigahama was about to get in next, but she spun around to face me, pattered up to me, and grabbed my sleeve. Still looking at the ground, she dragged me by the sleeve into the ride. "H-Hikki, hurry up."

"Huh? Hold on, I'm going with Tobe…" I had absolutely no intention of riding with him, but that just fell out of my mouth.

"Come on, people are waiting behind us."

If she was gonna be like that, I had no choice but to get in. Then the door of the cart was closed, and the staff lady waved us off as she said, "Have a nice trip in the world of the Bamboo Hunt!"

The trolley moved through the darkness, until suddenly, red and orange lights burst ahead. Yuigahama's downward-facing profile appeared red—maybe from those very lights. She glanced over at me. It made me a little embarrassed.

Yukinoshita sat on one end with Yuigahama in the middle, and then there was me, as close to the edge as possible. Yuigahama opened up a little bit of space between us, shrinking the gap between herself and Yukinoshita.

"…You're squashing me," Yukinoshita muttered to herself.

"Oh, sorry." Yuigahama inched over toward me. So I did my best to lean that much farther to the outside. The distance between us didn't change much, in the end.

The trolley continued on, and we came out in front of a big screen.

Ginnie the Grue was running about all over the place on-screen,

and the ride was also packed with stuffed Grue-bears jumping around. Responding to the Grue-bears' movements, our cart moved around the ride.

"Whoa, this is amazing…" My honest impression slipped out.

Yukinoshita snapped back at me, "Quiet."

She's actually keeping us from talking… She's real focused on this, huh…?

But when I stopped talking, I was uncomfortably focused on how the jolting movements of the cart would occasionally make an elbow hit an elbow, or an arm touch an arm. It really was bad for my heart.

Halfway through, I stopped paying attention to what was happening in the ride and just tried to keep myself free from obstructive thoughts.

X X X

Right after leaving Grue's Bamboo Hunt, there was a Grue-bear gift shop.

Hayama's group had gotten out first, so they were waiting by the entrance, and Ebina and Tobe came up behind us.

"Man, Grue-bear is the best!" Getting to ride with Ebina must have been fun for Tobe, as he was wearing a smile of supreme bliss —and there was one other person with a bright look on her face, too.

It was Yukinoshita. She was sighing deep in satisfaction.

So she really enjoyed herself, huh…?

"Hey, Hikki. That's the Grue-bear shop. So are you gonna get something?" Yuigahama asked, coming up from a half-step behind to poke my back.

I didn't turn back, looking straight at the Ginnie the Grue shop. "Yeah…"

Well, after what I'd said to Yukinoshita, I had to look for a present for Komachi here.

"Sorry, I'm gonna go do a bit of shopping here," I told Hayama's group, and Isshiki snickered at me.

"Huh? You're going to buy something here?"

"…A present for my little sister." *Why're you looking so gleeful,*

Irohasu…? I already know Grue-bear merch doesn't suit me, okay? I don't need you to point it out.

"All right, so then what should we do?" Hayama asked the others.

Miura looked away from the Ginnie the Grue gift shop and toward the exit instead. "I'll pass."

Ebina questioned her curiously. "You don't want to, Yumiko?"

"I mean, his eyes are so not cute. I'd rather go see Marie the Sassy Cat or something."

Marie the Sassy Cat is another Destiny character that's popular with girls—she's some kind of pink cat.

Miss Queen here is actually pretty cunning for choosing a more girly character instead of being interested in Ginnie the Grue. She really does like pink, huh? I like pink quite a lot, too.

I was impressed, but someone else was emitting an incredible chill. It goes without saying that it was Yukinoshita giving Miura that icy glare. *This is no good; Yukinoshita is super-mad. At this rate, I can only imagine one future: Yukinoshita spends the next thirty minutes arguing Miss Queen into the ground and making her cry.*

While I was thinking, *This is looking bad…*, Isshiki took a step into the Grue-bear shop and picked up a nearby stuffed animal. "Oh, you think so? Isn't this one supercute, though? Right, Hayama?" Isshiki was asking Hayama, but for some reason, Yukinoshita was nodding with closed eyes. Of course, Isshiki's comment wasn't about Grue-bear being cute but rather saying the word to emphasize her own cuteness.

But it seemed that satisfied Yukinoshita. The cold air receded.

"Anyway, so yeah, we're not gonna buy anything, so we're gonna go line up for lunch. It looked supercrowded," Tobe said with a snap of his fingers. It was an annoying gesture, but it was a wonderful suggestion. He's a good guy. Even if he is annoying.

But still, I felt a little awkward about having them line up for us while we were shopping, so making sure it was okay, I asked, "… You don't mind?"

"Aw, it's fine. You got that thing, right, Hikitani? You're picking a present for your sister? So you can take your time with that."

"Sorry." I gave him a nod of a bow, and Tobe waved his hands as if to say, *Don't worry about it.*

"It's fine, it's fine. Hayatooo, let's go!"

"Yeah," Hayama replied, and he and Tobe left the gift shop

together.

If Hayama was going, then Miura and Isshiki would follow. It didn't seem Ebina was much interested in Grue-bear, either, as she called over her shoulder, "See you, then," and followed after the others.

The only ones left in the gift shop were me, Yukinoshita, and Yuigahama.

Yukinoshita removed her scarf, carefully folding it as she turned her eyes to Yuigahama and me. "Well then, let's find a present for Komachi-chan."

"Yeah, thanks. Tell me if there's anything you recommend."

"Yes, I'll try selecting a few," she said, and then she started scouring the gift shop like a pro. I could very much rely on her, but I also wondered if she wasn't a little too hyped up about this… Well, since I had asked her for help, I couldn't complain, though.

But I feel uneasy about leaving it all to her, so I guess I'll search for something, too… For now, I reached out to a nearby shelf.

While I was having a staring contest with a stuffed Grue-bear in a Santa suit, Yuigahama came up beside me. "I'll help you pick, too."

"Thanks. Frankly, I have my doubts about choosing something without a second opinion."

"I think that would be enough to make Komachi-chan happy, though."

"Nah, she's actually pretty outspoken to family about her tastes."

"Really? Then we've got to find something good." Yuigahama compared stuffed animals, blankets, puppets, key chains, and all sorts of things.

Hey, I think this is a bit too much Grue-bear merch they're putting out… Looking at the stuffed animals alone, there was considerable volume and variety.

"A present for Komachi-chan, huh…? You didn't ask her what she likes?" Yuigahama asked as she eyed a Grue-bear puppet with curiosity.

"I did, but she just asked me for money to put toward magazines or a gift card or whatever…"

"O-oh… Ah-ha-ha…" Yuigahama gave an awkward smile of dismay. If that was her reaction to gift card–type things, I really couldn't tell her the third choice was household appliances…

Yuigahama must have liked the puppet she'd picked up, as she put it on her hand and waved it all around. With an "Aaay!" she grabbed my hand with the puppet to bother me. Aaay*, that's annoying and cute and getting in the way and embarrassing. It's really embarrassing, actually, so please cut it out.*

When I smacked the puppet away this time, she shoved it at my face and wiggled it around. When my eyes squarely met those of the puppet, Yuigahama started talking in this weird, fake voice. "… And what do you want for Christmas, Hikkipher Robin?"

Was she trying to imitate Grue-bear? It really sounded nothing like him. And what the heck is *Hikkipher Robin*? It was so funny, I was half laughing as I tried to reply. "No, I…"

But when I started saying that, I suddenly remembered what had happened the day before and choked.

Yuigahama must have been confused by my strange silence, as she tilted her head, looking up at me. When our eyes met, she made a little noise of realization. I could see her face turning red.

She must have been remembering the same thing. What I'd said that time.

I was so embarrassed, I covered the lower half of my face with my right hand and turned away. "I'm fine…"

"O-okay…" Yuigahama yanked off the puppet and readily returned it to the shelf.

We both looked at the merch for a while without saying anything. As we did, more people shuffled into the gift shop. It looked like they were coming in as a group.

"It really is crowded, huh?" Yuigahama commented.

"Well, it's that time of year. I'm surprised you wanted to come now. I'd rather not have, if possible…" Looking around the shop interior as it started to get crowded, a sigh slipped out of me. It had to be because of the Christmas season, after all—the whole park was crowded, and everywhere we went was packed with people. Even just walking around made me tired.

"But…I'd…like to…come again," she said hesitantly, and when I turned toward her voice, she was petting a big stuffed animal.

"You can come anytime. It's close, after all."

"That's not…what I mean…" She gave me a probing look.

That was a prickling stab in my heart as I remembered the thoughtless promise I'd made during the cultural festival. Between how busy we'd been during the athletic festival, then the field trip

and the student council election one after another, it had been put off all this time.

I'd thought I'd taken one step closer with her. Just how much had the distance between us changed?

I reached out to the big Grue-bear plush that Yuigahama had been petting and looked at its face as I said, "Well, Land is kind of eh around this time of year, but what about the newer one next door?"

"Huh?" Lifting her head, Yuigahama looked at me.

"But if it's not crowded, even Land is fine."

Though I knew there had to be a better way to put it, I couldn't find the right words.

But Yuigahama still answered me softly. "…That one might be…pretty…quiet…"

"…You think?"

"Yeah…" Yuigahama looked down and nodded.

Watching out of the corner of my eye, I patted the head of the stuffed animal, then walked over to a different shelf. "…Well, eventually."

"Yeah, eventually." I could hear the cheer returning to her voice behind me.

"Right, then. Guess I'll pick something," I said in an apathetic tone. Now the discussion was over, for the moment. The continuation would probably be when the promise was fulfilled.

As if in response, Yuigahama called out to me brightly, "Hey, Hikki, what about this?"

I turned around to see her wearing a hairband with dog ears on it. It seemed to be merch for the dog character that appeared in *Ginnie the Grue*, and it had one drooping ear.

Despite having come to ask me, she didn't seem to actually care about my opinion. Instead, she went to admire herself in the mirror as she *ooh*'d excitedly.

"Oh, I think this one would be perfect for her. Yukinooon!" she called out, and Yukinoshita came over with both her arms filled with Grue-bear merch.

"Which do you think Komachi-chan would like?" Yukinoshita glanced anxiously at the Grue-bear merchandise in her arms.

U-um, you don't have to be so serious about this, okay?

Holding the headband hidden behind her back, Yuigahama came up to her worried friend. "Hey, Yukinon."

“What?”

When Yukinoshita tilted her head, Yuigahama snatched that opportunity to smack the headband onto Yukinoshita’s head with an “Aaay!” This one had to be another character that appeared in *Ginnie the Grue.* With the cat headband on, Yukinoshita stared at her in puzzlement.

Then without missing a beat, Yuigahama lined up beside Yukinoshita. “Hikki! Take a photo, come on!”

“Huh? Okay…”

Is this okay, if we’re not buying…? Well, I guess it’s like a dressing room kinda thing, I thought as I raised my camera and snapped the shutter.

8

And then **Yukino Yukinoshita**…

Once night falls, a cold wind from the sea always begins to blow over Destiny Land.

When the winds are too strong, the fireworks following the parade are canceled. But seeing as nothing had been announced yet, there would probably be fireworks as scheduled.

After the *Ginnie the Grue* gift shop, we visited various attractions and took reference photos. I had severe doubts as to how useful these photos would be, but, well, at the end of the day, we had our hands tied for the whole weekend anyway. Thinking about it that way, even if these photos were just for reference, they probably wouldn't be completely useless.

This constant walking and standing was obviously tiring. Though we'd sandwiched in breaks on the way, we couldn't really rest in the crowded park, and we were all getting worn out.

We were still walking around now, right before the parade was to start, figuring we'd get one last ride in at the end, but everyone was walking slower than they had in the afternoon.

As a sort of habit, whenever I'm traveling with a group, I'll naturally position myself diagonally and to the rear of everyone else. That meant I got an indirect view of all their tired faces and saw them talking less.

So it jumped out at me in particular when Isshiki, walking diagonally ahead of me, expressly spoke to Tobe. "…Tobe, can I ask you something?" Her voice was quiet, taking care not to draw too much attention.

But Tobe's response was loud. "Sure, whassup, Irohasu?"

Isshiki yanked on his sleeve in rebuke and whispered something

into his ear.

"…Huh? Seriously?" Tobe said, less like he was surprised, and more like he just didn't really like what he was hearing. With a complicated expression, he glanced around warily and lowered his voice to reply. But since he was usually so loud, it was weird and unnatural for him to talk so secretively.

It seemed the discussion was over with just those few remarks, as Isshiki gave Tobe a casual bow of her head, then hopped off to the front, where Hayama and Miura were. It seemed she'd made some request of him, something that made him uncomfortable. He was constantly tugging at the hair at the back of his head.

Up at the front, Isshiki fell into step beside Hayama, and on his other side, there was Miura. It looked like they meant to continue ahead through the square.

When Isshiki started to talk with him, Hayama responded in an easygoing manner, showing few signs of exhaustion, but Miura's steps were dragging. She was clearly tired.

Yuigahama and Ebina, following after them, chattered away enthusiastically with each other, still full of energy.

Walking in the back, I was kind of in tired mode.

Yukinoshita, walking in a similar position, had also slowed down a bit. Endurance wasn't her forte to begin with, and on top of that, there were the crowds. She had to be the most tired.

She continued to move her thin legs heavily. Suddenly, she breathed a deep sigh.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

But her reply was curt. "I'm fine."

Was she not looking at me because she was tired or because things were still awkward between us? I couldn't quite decide.

"Oh, whoops!" Hearing Yuigahama's voice from up front, I looked over.

Right then, a rope was being strung up across the road to the square we were just about to cross, to secure a route for the parade.

Yuigahama and Ebina dashed across, sliding in right before the rope was in place. Yukinoshita and I were walking a bit behind; we didn't stand a chance.

When the path cut us off from the others, Yuigahama remembered us and turned around, waving her hand like, *Heeey!*

I responded by casually raising my hand. "Go on! We'll catch up later."

“Okay!” Yuigahama flailed her arm at us, then went ahead after Hayama and the others.

I watched her go, then turned back to Yukinoshita. “…Then let’s go.”

“All right.”

We knew where we were headed anyway. It was sort of a detour around the square, but it wasn’t like it was impossible. But the blockade for the parade meant the population density of the other route had increased, too.

Plus, now that it was night, lights were coming on bright on every attraction. A lot of people were stopping and raising their cameras to capture those images, so we couldn’t move forward like we wanted.

By the time we reached Splosh Mountain, the one we’d planned to ride next, quite a lot of time had passed. I looked over toward the entrance but couldn’t find Yuigahama and the others.

Yukinoshita was looking around, too, but once she figured they weren’t around, she opened her mouth to say, “Shall we call them?”

“Yeah…” Pulling out my phone, I dialed the number of the one in that group I knew best. After three rings, she finally picked up.

“Hellooo.” There was the hubbub of voices in the background. That was probably Hayama and their other friends.

“Where are you? We’re here.”

“Oh, sorry! We went in without you.”

“O-okay…” *I thought they’d wait for us, but guess not…*

I was a little shocked, and Yuigahama must have picked that up in my voice, as she hurriedly added, “It’s okay, it’s okay! If you scoot through the fast pass line to meet up with us, it’ll be quick. It’s empty right now, so you can go right on through. That’s why we figured it’d be okay for us to go ahead…”

Still listening to her, I glanced over at the line.

It was true that the line was far shorter than usual. The sign estimated the wait at this point to be about thirty minutes. And considering how fast the line was moving, it might actually be even shorter. Besides, just as Yuigahama said, if we cut through the fast pass lane, we should be able to meet up easily. Sometimes people who leave the line to go to the bathroom will use it to get back, so if we were doing it to meet up with friends, it should be no problem.

“All right.”

“Yeah, then see you soon!”

I hung up and looked at Yukinoshita. “She said we should meet up inside,” I said. Yukinoshita nodded back at me, and we headed for the line.

You can’t use the fast pass line right from the start. It can only be used for a limited time, and they do actually check it. So we lined up in the regular line to wait. But even that was moving along quickly. The crowds were probably heading for the parade instead.

“Let’s go with this line for now, until it stops moving,” I said. If we went as far as we could and then used the fast pass line like a passing lane, we’d be able to find Yuigahama and the others quickly.

Meanwhile, the line took us pretty far at a decent clip.

But then a little ahead, there was what looked like a group of high school kids in *gakuran* uniforms having a quarrel. The rides would empty out during the parade and the fireworks, so young people would see this as their opportunity to race around as fast as possible to a bunch of rides. It seemed they were doing just that and, in the process, had cut in front of someone ahead of them in line, or something.

A staff member dashed over right away, and all of them were ejected from the premises. This rebuke cast a solemn pall over everyone waiting.

Yukinoshita looked over the faces of the people before and after us in the line. “It doesn’t feel as if we can slip out by saying our friends are a little ahead now…”

“Yeah. Guess I’ll call them again.” I pulled out my phone and pressed redial. It rang several times, but there was no answer. “She’s not answering…” *Yuigahama’s the only one whose number I know…* I’d told Hayama my number before, but I still didn’t know his.

“Do you know anyone else’s?” I tried asking Yukinoshita just in case, but she shook her head. *Of course…*

With no other choice, we waited while I tried calling Yuigahama a few times. Meanwhile, the line moved along until the lower level came into view. Once we came down the curve, we’d be at the ride’s boarding area already.

“Now that we’ve come this far, it’d be faster to get on rather than go back,” I said. “They might be waiting at the exit.”

“…T-true.” Yukinoshita sounded somehow uneasy as she

answered. Glancing over, I saw she'd turned away.

"…What's wrong?"

"…" She didn't reply to my question.

…Wait. Hold on a second. Wait, wait, wait. I feel like I've seen this quite a few times before… Feeling a little uneasy, I cleared my throat. "Can I just ask something?"

"What is it?" she asked back, expression stiff.

Looking her straight in the eye and attentive to her reaction, I asked slowly, "Are you scared of these things?"

We both stared at each other with blank faces for a while without saying a word. Then her eyes slid over to one side. "…I… wouldn't say I'm scared…"

Oh, that expression looks familiar… It's just like when she said she's scared of dogs.

Ahhh, so that's it; I knew it! I was familiar with this behavioral pattern from Yukinoshita. Indeed, thinking back now, she'd been wobbling a bit after riding the Mountain. So that hadn't been because she'd been affected by the crowds; it was because she didn't like roller coasters.

"You should've just told me… Let's go back."

"I'm fine."

"Uh, but you don't really like it, right?" I said, and Yukinoshita scowled.

And then, rather firmly, she said, "I'm saying I'll be fine."

"Don't be dumb. You don't have to force yourself, and it's not worth being so stubborn about." My words came out harsher than usual, too.

That made Yukinoshita's shoulders twitch, and she dropped her gaze. "…That's not it. I really am okay," she said, and her voice sounded younger than usual. No, that's not it. She just normally looked so mature, when actually, she was the same age as me. She continued, words halting. "I felt uneasy about it, but when I was with Yuigahama, I was all right… So I think…I'll be all right."

She wasn't giving a clear and distinct reason; in fact, she was being rather vague, compared with her usual, logical way of speaking. But that's what makes me think it was close to what she really felt. So then I should respect that.

"Well, if you say so…," I said, but she didn't raise her head yet. *She's still scared of roller coasters, so she can't be fine with getting on when she's like this…* Searching for the words to say to her, I

scratched at my head. “And you know. You can just take it easy on the ride. You’re not gonna die, after all.”

“O-of course,” she said, head still sagging, and then she glanced at me with upturned eyes. “…We won’t die, right?”

Just how anxious about this is she…?

“It’ll be fine. I mean, *I’ve* never heard of it happening,” I said, and as we made our way down the line, she trudged after me. After descending the final curve, we arrived at the boarding zone.

Then it was our turn.

I got on first. Fists clenched tight, Yukinoshita boarded, too. She grabbed for the bar as soon as she sat down. She was squeezing it so hard, her arms were trembling.

Even once the log slowly started floating out, she didn’t relax in her seat.

Eventually, some fancy music started playing, and the story of Br’er Weasel and Br’er Ferret doing something or other began to play. Every time the robot weasel blinked, there was this clacking mechanical sound. But it seemed Yukinoshita was too wound up to notice even that, and her eyes were focused straight ahead.

“Um…it’s not gonna fall yet, so you don’t have to cling to the bar.”

“Y-yes, o-of course…” She finally let go of the bar. Then she exhaled a tired sigh.

“You really don’t seem to like this…,” I said. Even though I knew she wasn’t a fan, I hadn’t thought it’d be this bad.

Yukinoshita smiled in self-deprecation. “Yes. Things happened with my sister, a long time ago…”

“Hmm? Oh, your sister, huh?”

Her again…

Haruno Yukinoshita is her older sister and a perfect Demon Superhuman, surpassing even Yukinoshita. *But actually, Miss Yukinoshita hasn’t been perfect at all, has she…?* Oh, she’s by far superior to all the rest, though.

But the one to surpass her was always Haruno Yukinoshita.

It seemed talking calmed Yukinoshita down somewhat, as she was looking around the attraction. There were frogs dancing around the shores, and jets of water spraying in circles.

Matching the gentle pace of the log, Yukinoshita spoke slowly. “It was when I was little. She always teased me when we came to places like this.”

“I can kind of imagine…” Haruno could always find time in her already busy schedule to mess with her sister. When they’d been younger, she would have teased Yukinoshita as mercilessly as any bully.

Yukinoshita giggled. I think this was the first time she’d smiled since getting on the ride. “Yes, she would shake the Ferris wheel seats, peel my hands off the bar when we were on roller coasters, and, well, all sorts of things. Oh, and when I stopped the coffee cup, she would keep spinning it the whole time… She always seemed to be having so much fun then…” As she spoke, her expression gradually darkened. I felt exhausted just listening to her. *Haruno is basically the cause of everything Yukinoshita is scared of, isn’t she?* “She’s always like that…,” Yukinoshita muttered.

The log continued along a deep, dark course. A vulture robot said something ominous. When I looked up at the vulture, the ceiling opened wide, and the night sky peeked in. The log rattled as it ascended. We’d be at the top soon. Yukinoshita tensed up.

The moment I thought we were going to dive straight down, the log rattled to a stop and sat there horizontally.

There, we could see outside Destiny Land. The active volcano attraction of Destiny Sea emitted a bright-red light, and the cluster of hotels was lit with dazzling Christmas lights. In the distance, you could see the illuminated facade of the new city center.

And spread out below us was the sight of Destiny Land at night, its many lights sparkling like stars.

Seeing it, Yukinoshita breathed a short sigh. “Hey, Hikigaya.”

“Hmm?” I turned around, and the white castle illuminated by pale blue came into view.

Wearing her starkly white coat, close to tears, Yukinoshita was smiling.

Her noble, fragile figure stole my breath away.

She let go of the bar and grasped my sleeve. When our skin touched, it felt like a clench around my heart.

Eventually, I felt us drifting up, as if we were falling forever.

“One day, help me.”

Her whisper disappeared into the air rushing by as we fell, and I couldn’t reply.

I think that was probably the first wish Yukino Yukinoshita had ever voiced.

X X X

The gift shop was a short walk from the exit of Splosh Mountain. I picked out a random drink there and bought it, then returned the way I'd come.

After getting off the ride, Yukinoshita had been unsteady on her feet, so she was resting on a bench right outside the exit. I returned to the bench to discover she'd gone shopping and was tucking a long, thin plastic bag into her bag. When I noticed it, she closed it and set it on her knees.

"Here." I held out the Grue-bear drink that had come with a Grue-bear bottle case (Christmas version) that I'd just bought at the gift shop, and Yukinoshita graciously accepted it.

"Thank you… How much was it?"

"No, it's fine; I don't need anything. I'd feel bad to rip money off a sick person."

"I can't accept it for free."

"Ambulances don't take money."

"The ambulance workers do accept proper compensation."

"There are good civilians who do it for free. I'm just doing this for myself, and you have to deal with it. Take it."

"You're just being contrary…" She was exasperated, but she squeezed the bottle case tight in both hands. Then she gently stroked the raised Grue-bear design with her finger. "…You've done this before."

"Have I?" I said as I tossed back the coffee I'd also bought in that gift shop.

Yukinoshita twirled the bamboo-themed straw stuck in the Grue-bear bottle. "Yes, my sister was there then."

"…Oh yeah." I think that was when I first met Haruno. Now that I think of it, I'd forced Yukinoshita to take that stuffed animal I'd won at a crane game (and she'd tried to give it back). I'd met Haruno right after that.

"Your perception of her was correct immediately, so I was startled…," Yukinoshita said with a wry chuckle. I guess the

memory must have amused her.

"I just kinda had a sense of her. Besides, even if you do see through her, she doesn't try to hide her nature."

"That's right. I think that's part of her charm. Everyone has always loved her. Despite being the way she is…no, because she's like that, she's been loved and coddled and had high expectations placed on her…and she's met those expectations," Yukinoshita said. A sort of heat was creeping into her voice. Depending on how you listened to her, you might think she was proudly boasting about her sister. But that heat rapidly dissipated. "I've always stayed behind her, acting like a doll…so I've been called a quiet child, not a troublemaker… But I know that behind my back, they've called me unfriendly, disagreeable—among other things."

As she spoke, I made short noises of acknowledgment to show that I was listening. I put my lips to my coffee again. It was warming me up, but it was particularly bitter.

Quiet, not a troublemaker, a good girl. Were those words constricting her?

"I've gotten that, too," I said. "Unfriendly and disagreeable… I still do—from Miss Hiratsuka."

"You're more cheeky, or brash, or trash, or something like that, aren't you?"

"Hey. One of those things was not like the others," I said, and Yukinoshita laughed pleasantly. Eventually, that turned into a peaceful smile.

"I think you and my sister seem that way because you're consistent in your actions…but I didn't know how to act." She looked up at the sky. Above us were not stars but lamps glowing orange. They were hung up on a line, swaying in the wind. "I'm sure Hayama and I are the same, in that way. Because we've always been watching her."

I was a little surprised at Hayama's name coming up all of a sudden. Hayama's relationship with the Yukinoshita sisters goes back way further than mine and is probably deeper.

That territory is still completely unknown to me.

But still, Yukino Yukinoshita and Hayato Hayama—I understand that Haruno Yukinoshita is always there, where both of them wound up.

One has continued to admire her, even despite her hostility.

One has assimilated himself in an attempt to approach her, out

of his admiration.

And how did those two see themselves?

I wanted to ask, but I didn't do it. I poured black coffee into my half-opened mouth and asked something else. "Do you still want to be like her?" During the cultural festival some time ago, Yukinoshita had spoken of how she'd once admired Haruno.

"Do I? I don't really think so now… But my sister has things I don't."

"And you want them?"

Yukinoshita shook her head. "No. I wonder why I don't, and I'm disappointed in myself for it."

I felt like I could understand that. Admiration, envy, and jealousy all eventually lead to despair. All you can understand from looking at others is your own deficits.

Yukinoshita dropped her gaze to her hands. "And you do, too. You have what I don't, too… We aren't anything alike, are we?"

"Well, of course…" We were not at all alike. But because we had a few points that were almost in common, I'd projected myself, decided I knew best, made mistaken assumptions, and mistook one feeling for another.

"That's why…I think I wanted something else," Yukinoshita said, and then she adjusted the collar of her coat and faced me. "When I realized there's nothing I can do, I wanted something that neither you nor my sister have… Because I thought if I had that, I could help."

"Help what?" I asked, wanting to fill in the missing words. What could she help, if she had what?

But she wouldn't tell me.

"…Oh, I wonder." She smiled girlishly, almost like a test.

The answer to that question was probably her reason.

The reason why Yukino Yukinoshita had tried to run for president in the student council election.

Or it was something she still had yet to speak of, that I had yet to ask about.

I hadn't asked what she meant that moment when the log had fallen, either. And she hadn't touched on it. But as if in place of that, she softly muttered something else.

The idea that I would understand, even if she didn't say, even if I didn't ask, was just like a certain someone's mistaken wish.

I finished my now-lukewarm coffee. When Yukinoshita saw I

was done, she stood up. “I’m fine now, so let’s get going.”

“Yeah,” I answered, then headed off for the square. I recalled we’d planned to see the fireworks there, after this.

The parade was soon coming to a close. Then the road that had been blocked off would be opened.

X X X

I called Yuigahama to ask when we’d meet up.

Yukinoshita and I walked to the white castle in the square without really talking. Now that the parade was over, the crowds had receded a bit, and it was much easier to walk around, compared with earlier. Taking a break must have helped Yukinoshita, too, as her pace seemed more grounded.

Once we arrived at the square, we searched for Yuigahama.

“Oh, Hikki! Yukinon! Over here, over here!” Cell phone in hand, like she was about to call us, Yuigahama waved wide. As soon as we were together again, she smacked her hands together and bowed her head. “Sorry we went on without you!”

“It’s all right,” Yukinoshita said with a smile, and Yuigahama sighed in relief.

“Well, you weren’t alone,” I said, “and I wouldn’t want to make you all wait. More importantly, did you get photos of the parade?”

“Oh, yep! I did!” Yuigahama said, and she showed us the pictures with her camera. Since data collection was our excuse for being here, I wanted to get a solid sense of a Christmas event like this one.

“See, Yukinon. Look, look!”

“…Would you mind if I checked that data?” Yukinoshita muttered quietly, pressing her hands against her chest. It seemed she rather regretted having missed Grue-bear in the parade.

Uh, well, if you’d just said so, we could’ve seen it in person, you know?

The pair of them were looking at the camera and talking excitedly about this and that—but enough about that, what about the others?

It was about time for the fireworks to start.

Then, looking around the square, I heard some familiar loud

voices.

"Huh? Where's Hayato?"

"Oh, Yumiko, over here a minute, c'mon."

"Hey, Tobe, what?"

Tobe came over with Miura in tow, while Ebina followed after.

"Uh, um. Like, you know, I dunno… There's this cool thing over here? Ebina, you should come over here, too, eh?"

"Huh? Okay, well, I'm fine with anywhere, though."

I feel like Ebina's got a rather aggressive barrier to Tobe's advances…

Anyway, now we were basically all there. It was just Hayama and Isshiki left… I was examining the area, and Yuigahama did the same. "Tobecchi," she asked, "where are Hayato and Iroha-chan?"

"Huh? Ah…well, they'll come soon," Tobe said rather vaguely, but he's always so half-assed about explaining things that it's difficult to tell what he means… Well, he's a good guy, though.

While we were talking, the streetlights and decorations lit around the square went out. Then classical music began to play.

"It's starting, isn't it?" Yukinoshita said, looking up at the white castle. It seemed the fireworks were going to be around there.

As expected of an annual pass holder—she's so knowledgeable.

I looked up in the same direction as Yuigahama and Yukinoshita.

Then, in the clear winter sky, multicolored halos of light burst into wild bloom. If you're talking fireworks, it's standard to have them in summer, but these fireworks bursting only to vanish over Orion were rather classier than I'd have thought.

"Brings back memories, huh?" Yuigahama leaned over to murmur in my ear.

I felt a shiver and turned around, but she must have forgotten what she'd just said, as she was watching the fireworks and *ooh*ing as she clapped her hands. *Listen, that distracted me with what's happening on the ground, and now I can't concentrate on the fireworks at all. I'll sue.*

Unable to bring myself to look up again, with the fireworks blinking in my vision, I caught sight of some familiar people, turned away from us.

The pair was standing in the dark, but each time a firework went up, the two of them were illuminated by its light.

Hayama and Isshiki were a little ways from us, watching the

show.

With each flash, the distance between the two of them reduced. It was just like a shadow play, and before I knew it, that was all I was watching.

At the end, golden light rained down in the night sky.

In the brightly illuminated square, Isshiki slowly went away from Hayama, head listing downward. Meanwhile, Hayama looked up at the sky, then started in the opposite direction.

The music stopped, and the light of the streetlamps and the dazzling shine of the attractions returned.

As the guests sighed in satisfaction, Iroha Isshiki dashed past us, covering her mouth as if something was wrong.

“I-Irohasu?!” Tobe noticed immediately when she passed and called after her. “Hey, Irohasuuuu!”

But she didn’t turn around and disappeared into the crowd.

“I-I’m gonna go look for her!” Tobe rushed off.

Miura seemed to clue in. She twirled her hair around her finger and breathed a deep sigh. “Agh… I’ll go, too.”

“Then so will I.” Ebina followed after her, then Yuigahama lightly raised a hand.

“M-me too!”

“Yui and…Yukinoshita? Can you stay here? She might come back. And we’ll call once we’ve found her, so let Tobe and Ebina know,” Miura said to the two of them as she swept aside her hair in irritation. She seemed like she didn’t want to do this, but she was giving pretty sensible directions.

“Oh, okay,” Yuigahama replied, and Miura nodded back at her and strode off.

Watching Miura go, Yukinoshita tilted her head. “Did something happen?”

Well, I’m sure Yukinoshita was only watching the fireworks…

If my estimations were correct, this situation could only point to one thing.

Destiny Land on Christmas, the fireworks after the parade, and the white castle would have created a moment seemingly made for them. Plus Tobe’s attitude. Put them all together, and you had a full hand. Isshiki must have confessed her feelings to Hayama. I couldn’t imagine anything else.

“…Then I’ll go, too,” I said.

“Yeah, okay,” said Yuigahama, while Yukinoshita was still

obviously confused.

But I wasn't going to Isshiki. Miura could probably deal with her better—way better than if I went.

But I felt like I had to go to the other one.

Even after Isshiki left, Hayama didn't approach us. Which meant he was waiting.

Thinking back on that silhouetted scene I'd witnessed, I followed the path he would have taken.

And in the darkness, away from the white castle, I found him.

While everyone's attention was turned to Isshiki, he was just slightly off on a side path, walking in my direction. When he noticed me, he smiled sadly. "…Hey."

"'Sup."

Sitting down on the fence in the square, Hayama breathed a tiny sigh. "…I feel bad for Iroha."

"That's selfish. If you feel bad, then you should've just gone out with her," I said, and Hayama laughed awkwardly.

"I can't. You're rather inconsiderate to say something like that when you know what's going on."

"I guess." I could confidently say I was inconsiderate. The edges of my mouth twisted into an unpleasant smile.

But Hayama didn't really get angry. In fact, when he glanced at me, his eyes were sorrowful, even a little distressed. "…Did you know…why she came to confess to me?"

"No, of course not."

"I see…" But the way he said that, it was as if he was saying he'd been trying to prevent Isshiki from confessing this whole time.

"So did you know? That she, uh…well, had some feelings."

"…Yeah," he replied, sounding melancholy. There was no arrogance or conceit there. All I could sense from his tone was something like regret.

I see…

Hayama has to act dense about people's affections, or he can't maintain those relationships. When people's feelings fail to reach their target, they will distance themselves. That fact itself isn't his fault, but Hayama must have been forced to constantly dodge those affections to avoid that result.

That had also been clear with that incident during the school field trip. I'd sympathized with him then. I'd shown I understood. I couldn't say that was a mistake, but I knew avoiding things could

hurt people, too.

"If you noticed, then wasn't it just that you weren't ready?" I said.

Hayama slowly shook his head. "That's not it. I'm honestly flattered she feels that way. But she has it wrong. I don't think it's me…" He spoke hesitantly and vaguely. And I waited for him to continue, but the words never came. Instead, he changed the subject. "…You're amazing. Changing the people around you like that… Iroha probably feels the same…"

"Huh? What's with this sudden praise?" I said, and Hayama let out a dry laugh.

"Ha-ha, that's not what it is… I told you, I'm not as good a guy as you think," he insisted, the very same thing he'd said before on the school field. Then he dropped his head and sighed deeply. "I'm complimenting you…for my sake."

"Why would you do that…?" I questioned him, examining his face.

He was glaring at me with slightly narrowed eyes. "The same reason you assume I'm a good guy, most likely."

"There's no particular reason for that. I'm just telling you what I see."

"Oh really, now?" Hayama replied coldly.

No, that's not right.

I'd realized a long time ago. Hayato Hayama is not at all a saint. That thin smile was the greatest evidence of all.

He tucked away that smile, then stood from the fence he'd been sitting on. "I'm going home. Tell the others for me."

"Text them or something yourself."

"…Yeah. See you." He smiled wryly and casually raised a hand.

And then, without turning around, Hayato Hayama disappeared deeper into the darkness.

X X X

The train back was quiet. Of course, we were tired, too, but the greatest reason for the low volume was the lack of Tobe, who had been chattering away for Isshiki's sake earlier.

Miura and Ebina were also absent.

The three of them were taking the Musashino Line home, transferring to the train to Nishi Funabashi, which was different from the Keiyo Line route that Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, and Isshiki were taking. Either route was about the same for me, but it would be a pain in the butt to bother transferring, so I chose the Keiyo Line.

It was a little crowded on the train, and I couldn't get a seat, but it still wasn't as packed as during rush hour. Yuigahama and Yukinoshita chatted occasionally but were otherwise silent, staring out the windows.

We stayed on the train for about twenty minutes, when we were about to reach Kaihin-Makuhari Station, where Yukinoshita and I would get off.

"This is my stop," Yukinoshita said, going to stand in front of the doors, and Yuigahama followed her.

"I-I'll get off here, too."

"Isn't your stop later?" I asked.

Yuigahama took Yukinoshita's arm. "It's the weekend, so today, I'm staying over at Yukinon's place."

"Oh, okay."

Well, Yuigahama had often stayed over at Yukinoshita's place before, so if she had an opportunity like this, then all the more reason for her to do so. I should honestly welcome that their relationship was back to that stage.

Regardless, I had to get off at this station, too. So Isshiki would be left alone on the train. "Isshiki, where's your station?" I asked her, but she didn't answer. Her response was a tug-tug on my jacket sleeve.

Then she held out her bag of souvenirs. "Hey. This bag is really heavy."

"You bought too much…," I said, but I accepted the bag. Then suddenly, Yuigahama smiled.

"…Yeah, maybe that's best."

"Please do be careful, Isshiki."

Miss Yukinoshita? You're implying something else there, aren't you?

When we arrived at Kaihin-Makuhari, the two of them got off the train. Left behind, Isshiki and I continued on the gently swaying train for about three stations more.

The station where I got off was Chiba Minato Station. From there, I'd transfer over to the monorail. There weren't many

passengers around this hour, and we were the only ones aboard.

The monorail slid along through the nighttime lights. I could never get used to how high it was, and its path through the sky, combined with the floating feeling of dangling from the rail above, made it feel like another kind of park ride.

Looking out the window, Isshiki sighed and muttered, “Agh…it was no use…”

“…Uh, look, you knew it wasn’t gonna happen if you tried it now.” I hadn’t known Isshiki for all that long, and it wasn’t like I was particularly close with Hayama, either. But still, I’d never expected those two expressly to try that method of getting closer.

Still watching the city view beyond the window, Isshiki said, “…But I had to. The mood was so perfect.”

“That’s surprising. I’d have thought you weren’t the type to get swept up in the moment,” I said.

Isshiki’s reflection in the window cracked the slightest smile. “I’m surprised, too. Being that emotional.”

“…Yeah, you act like you’re boy crazy, but you’re actually pretty shrewd, like…,” I began, but Isshiki turned around and cut me off.

“I don’t mean me… I mean, you know…”

“What?” The conversation had made another leap. I’d thought we were talking about Isshiki, so when had the topic changed? Did she mean me? Or was she talking about someone else? *Which makes me think, why does she never call me by my name…? Is it like, does she maybe not remember it?*

As I was considering these matters, Isshiki was staring intently at me. It seemed she was talking about me after all. She chuckled. “Got me right here, you know?”

“What did?” I asked.

Isshiki adjusted herself in her seat, and her manner extremely serious, she straightened her back, looked me right in the eye, and said, “…Now I want something real, too.”

Those words made me blush. *Oh yeah, right when I left the clubroom that day, I ran into her…* I pressed my hand to my forehead. “You heard that…?”

“It was just loud enough,” she said nonchalantly.

I replied a bit pathetically, “…Forget about it.”

“I won’t… I can’t.” Isshiki’s expression was far more serious than usual. “That’s why today, I thought I’d give it a shot.”

I didn't know what the real thing she wished for was. It wasn't necessarily the same as my fantasy. I didn't know if such a thing even existed. But Iroha Isshiki did wish for it, and that's a very noble thing, in my opinion.

I could hardly think of any words of consolation, but I searched for something to offer her. "Um, well. You know, don't worry about it. It's not like you're at fault."

She blinked. Then she scooted away from me. "Whatareyoutaki ngadvantageofmyheartbreakheretotrytoseducemeI'msorryit'sstillkin dofnoway."

"I'm not…"

Just how is she even interpreting this…? Did she hear the word *like* and think this was a confession?

Seeing my exasperation, Isshiki cleared her throat, shifted back to where she'd been before, and sat down again. "Anyway, it's not over yet. In fact, this is actually an effective way to target him. All the other girls will stay away from him out of sympathy for me, right?"

"…O-oh, is that how it works?" I said, half-impressed and half-exasperated. *Yeah, impressive, as always…*

Isshiki puffed out her chest with a chuckle and said proudly, "That's how it works. And besides, sometimes you have to go for it, even when you know you're gonna be rejected. Also, there's, like, when you reject someone, you think about them, right? You feel sorry for them, don't you? That's normal… So this loss is just strategic preparation to give me the advantage for the future… So, um…I have to do my best."

A little sob slipped out, and tears welled in her eyes.

I can't tell someone who's doing their best to do their best. Komachi says at times like that, you can just say *I love you*, but those are words for little sister use. I thought about giving her a pat on the head, at least, but that was also reserved for little sisters.

"You're really something."

That was all I could say.

Then she looked up at me with wet, upturned eyes. "It's your fault that I ended up like this."

"Uh, that you became president, sure, but everything else…"

But she didn't let me finish, leaning her face closer to mine to whisper in my ear, "Please take responsibility."

Then this younger girl gave me a devilish little smile.

9

Of her own accord, **Iroha Isshiki** takes a step.

After school that Monday, we gathered in the student council room.

Before our meeting with Kaihin High School, we were having a meeting for the sake of that meeting. Maybe soon we'd hold a meeting of the meeting, by the meeting, for the meeting. Thanks to Yuigahama's businesslike e-mail requesting everyone to get in touch, they'd all actually come.

The Soubu student council members were sitting at one corner of the meeting table. Isshiki was among them, and our eyes met.

Considering what had happened two days earlier, I'd figured she'd be feeling down, but it seemed not. She looked the same as always. Of course, she could just be pretending, though.

Isshiki scanned all the attendees. "Um, so why the gathering?"

"To confirm our objective and discuss where we're going," I answered.

Isshiki replied with an "Ahhh," a noise that made it unclear whether she truly understood.

Yukinoshita's eyebrows twitched together. "Normally, you should be the one arranging this."

"O-okay…" Isshiki twitched and straightened her posture under Yukinoshita's glare.

Yukinoshita was indeed a little scary, there…but it wasn't like we'd brought everyone together for the purpose of lecturing Isshiki. "Well, never mind that stuff now…," I said, trying to move the conversation on, but this time, Yukinoshita's sharp gaze turned to me.

"You shouldn't mistake kindness for leniency."

I understood what she was trying to say. You shouldn't mistake

it for affection or sadness or reassurance, either. Yukinoshita's strictness was like a whip of love, done out of consideration for Isshiki.

"But if you're only ever strict to her, she'll think you're being cold," I retorted.

"Still, doing everything for her isn't in her best interests," Yukinoshita shot back.

This is no good. It feels like at this rate, we'll never reach an agreement in this dispute.

"I kind of feel like my parents are yelling at me…," Isshiki muttered, and Yukinoshita was about to scold her again before Yuigahama stopped her.

"C-come on, Iroha-chan still isn't used to this…," Yuigahama said soothingly, and Yukinoshita withdrew.

"…That's true."

Still, what Yukinoshita said was reasonable. It was fundamentally preferable for Isshiki to be able to stand on her own feet from now on, as student council president. I'm not important enough to tell others what to do, and I don't understand the pounding of my heart, either, but I want to help Isshiki out in a way that will benefit her in the future.

I cleared my throat, then looked at our student council president in front of me. "Isshiki, do you understand what the problems are now?"

"Yeah, we don't have enough time, money, or people, right?"

"That's right. So what do we do about it?"

"Ummm…so outsourcing, was it? Gathering people from elsewhere. But we don't have the money to pay them, so it's like, we're trying to get the funds…"

So Isshiki was, in fact, aware of our current situation. It had seemed like she wasn't paying attention, but she actually was. Frankly, that alone made her preferable to the committee chair of the cultural and athletic festivals, strangely enough.

Having confirmed that Isshiki understood, I took the discussion to the next stage. "And judging from Miss Hiratsuka's reaction, it's unlikely we'll succeed in securing those funds. Also, I hate fundraising."

"The latter is a completely personal reason…" Yukinoshita sighed in exasperation.

But you know, Yukinon! Miss Gahama and Irohasu are both

nodding along, here! If we were going to come up with the money ourselves, based on my rough mental calculations, each person would need around five thousand yen at the very least… There was no way… At that sum, if I went crying to my parents, it might work out somehow, but if I had to go cry to my parents, I'd rather take the money for myself and crush the event. And to make it worse, there was a good chance we'd wind up having to raise even more money anyway.

As expected, now that it came down to a concrete problem like money, the student council members were exchanging looks. And the one who seemed the most reluctant about the fundraising idea was Isshiki. *Geez, this girl…*

"The current plan is pretty unrealistic," I said. "Even if we could make it happen, we could only do a part of it. It'd be a pretty sad event, considering what we've been touting."

"Yeah, maybe you're right…" Isshiki sighed. She must have been imagining it.

The plan to have musicians come perform for one hour each under the cool-sounding title of "music connecting us now" was already dubious on its own. What about that is connected…?

"That was the first thing we wanted to confirm with you—if you're okay with that. I want to know what your intentions are, as the student council. By the way, I don't care, either way. I came here as a helper. I just do what you tell me."

My question made Isshiki fold her arms and go *hmm* as she began racking her brains. "Well, thaaat's not good, huh? Sometimes it's just, like, if it's gonna be that shabby, it'd be best not to do it at all? But we can't quit, right? So I think it's kiiinda outta our control, y'knooow."

Her cutesy way of talking and the apathy clear in her statement made Yukinoshita press her temple like she had a headache. "Isshiki…"

"C-come on, guys…," Yuigahama intervened, and Isshiki twitched, too, immediately correcting herself.

"I'll do it! I'll do it right!!"

Hmm, that sounded kind of threatening, Yukinoshita…but whatever.

"Then I understand your goals here, Isshiki," I said, "but what about the rest of the student council?"

"Huh? Um, well… How about you guys?" Isshiki hesitantly

looked at the rest of those present.

All of them, including the vice president, exchanged glances and spoke with trepidation. “Well, we…”

“Yes, if we’re going to do a proper job, then…”

Seeing the others nod back at her, Isshiki smiled vaguely at me. It was like she was shy or embarrassed. “…Basically.”

So things were still awkward between Isshiki and the other student council members after all.

I think with Isshiki’s fundamental communication skills (her cheekiness), she’s capable of an open discussion or something with them, but her title of president and her lack of confidence in the job are probably what had been holding her back.

That wasn’t a problem I could solve. However, if a successful experience here were to lead to Isshiki gaining confidence in her role, that situation might change.

“Okay,” I said. “Then as for how we’re going to do that, first, there’s something in the way… Now then, quiz time! What is that something?”

“What?” Isshiki forgot to be on her best behavior, and she was now plainly looking at me like I was an idiot.

Damn it, when I went to the trouble of stirring up the crowd by making this into a quiz format for her… Come on, just answer.

But before Isshiki could say anything, Yukinoshita answered for her. “The structure of the meetings. That thoroughly enforced parliamentary system.” Looking over, I saw for some reason, Yukinoshita was raising her hand slightly. Had putting it into a quiz format stirred up her competitive spirit? As she waited for my answer, there was excitement in her eyes.

“Correct…,” I said, and Yukinoshita pumped a fist under the table.

Hmm, I wanted to make Isshiki answer that, though… Well, whatever. I’ll give the one who answered correctly eighty thousand points! (Because I’m Hachiman.)

“Well, just as Yukinoshita said, things will never get anywhere with that meeting, because they consider every single opinion in detail. There’s no one making the final call,” I said.

Yuigahama tilted her head. “Wouldn’t that be their student council president?”

“Right now, Tamanawa is only acting as a moderator or host. He sums up our ideas, but he won’t make decisions.”

The meetings sure looked lively. There were a lot of people there, and you could present ideas without them being rejected. So the fringe details, the nonessentials, got decided easily. But they were totally blind to the most central elements.

Meetings where you don't know who holds the power to decide are in fact meaningless—since even if a final conclusion emerges, no one can make the decision to go with it.

The ultimate ruling is not made because everyone is equal.

There were people who stood at the top, more or less: Tamanawa from the Kaihin side and Isshiki from the Soubu side. But they were only present, saying things like, *Hmm, what should we do?* so the decisions that needed to be made were falling by the wayside.

Isshiki must have had a thought, as she breathed a short sigh. "…I guess it's because I was bad at this after all…" Her head lowered.

"It's not your fault," I said to her.

"Really…?" She lifted her head and looked at me with dewy eyes.

So I nodded back at her and continued, "It's obviously the fault of whoever endorsed you as president."

"That was you, though…," she said, exasperated.

Well, you know. I think the spirit of *It's not my fault; it's society's* is important, right? "But more than that, if we're just talking about this situation, the fault lies with the way both sides are overly concerned with not rocking the boat and failing to decide properly who's in charge."

Fundamentally speaking, before you talk about win-win relationships or equal negotiation or a group of peers with no bosses or underlings, you need to decide who ultimately has the final right of decision. Since they'd failed to decide this at the beginning, it was no wonder things had come to this.

"…So then let's have a real meeting without all the buddy-buddy nonsense…one with opposition, confrontation, rejection, and winners and losers," I proposed.

The vice president's expression turned complicated. "Confrontation…? You mean to present opposing opinions now?"

"Yeah. We'll do some hard rejections and thorough opposition. I mean, I really don't want to do any fundraising."

"That's your reason, huh…?" Yuigahama was exasperated.

But I don't wanna do what I don't wanna do. And besides, I also didn't want to accept the phony decisions made by these meetings.

But ultimately, that was just my own personal feelings. For the rest, I would yield the conclusion to them. "That's it for my proposals, Isshiki. So what will the student council do?"

"Huh? I'm deciding? Is it okay for me to decide…?" With the discussion suddenly turned to her, Isshiki glanced all around. She looked to the other student council members. "…Wh-what do you guys think?"

The vice president responded to her question. "I think…it's best not to cause dissent. I think it'd be a little harsh to present an opposing plan at this point. We never opposed their plans before, either, and I'm not sure I want us to get a reputation for arguing…"

This vice president is a commonsense sort of guy—something I could call conservative, but it was a good thing Isshiki had a guy like him backing her up.

"Yeah, true," Isshiki said, then groaned and considered a bit. But then she jerked her head up, smiled at the vice president, and said, "But I'm going to do it anyway."

"Huh?"

Iroha Isshiki, student council president, declared to the confused vice president, "Personally, I don't wanna put on a crappy show."

Yukinoshita pressed her temple, while Yuigahama put on a strained smile. But I was impressed. I didn't know if that was how she really felt, but to offer a personal reason for action, at this point—maybe she would be someone to reckon with.

Since we'd come to a conclusion, next, we had to come up with a plan to counter the opposition. In the meetings with Kaihin before, they'd beaten us both in their level of noise and in ideas, which was the core point. We had to come up with some ideas ourselves, or we couldn't trade shots with them head-on.

"So then let's think about what we're going to do."

I went to stand in front of the whiteboard in the student council room and, pen squeaking, wrote out, *What we'll do*. It was a rather half-assed way to write it, if I do say so myself.

The first-year girl with the glasses and the pigtails wasn't a fan of this; she quietly went "Ah," stood up, and took my place as whiteboard writer. It seemed she was the clerk.

When I took my seat again, Isshiki watched me with an awkward *hmm*. “But still, there’s nothing that I want to do, y’knooow?”

“…Yeah. I don’t really have anything to add, either,” I said.

Isshiki sighed in exasperation. “That’s no good…”

“It’s fine. If we were just gonna do whatever we wanted, we might as well be playing around. Doing things that you don’t want to, things that are hard, is what makes it work.”

Then Yukinoshita, sitting opposite me, tapped her finger at her temple. “Your views on labor aside, you are indeed correct. The subject of the current plan is not the guests coming to the venue.”

“Oh, I see…” Isshiki nodded.

That was right. Kaihin’s plan had been put together based on what they wanted to do and was not directed at the attendees, who should fundamentally be a priority. It was true that there were seniors who liked music, but many of them wouldn’t be that interested. Besides, wouldn’t the little kids get bored? Of course, that would depend on the songs chosen and how the plays were staged, but I could assume from how things had been going that they had not been thinking about the details that deeply. They’d been talking about the “customer side” but were not putting themselves in the guests’ shoes.

They had the wrong goal in mind. Getting to the point, it didn’t at all matter what *we* wanted to do.

It seemed Isshiki understood that, too. But she got stuck immediately beyond that. “…Then what should we do?” she asked.

I pondered a bit. “There are a few ways we could move things along… Well, it’s like, you know. The deepest level of work is about how you avoid work.”

“That sounds really contradictory…” From the side, Yuigahama gave me a dull look.

How rude… “There’s no contradiction. When you don’t want to work but have to, you think about what to do about it. Slacking off or skipping out just creates more problems. The issue becomes how you deal with things efficiently.”

“You started from the most ridiculous premise, but I feel like you wound up at the right conclusion…” Yukinoshita seemed to have a headache and was pressing her temple.

Of course my conclusion was correct. Source: human history.

The progress of technology has always arisen from one thought:

What a hassle; I don't want to do the work. In other words, you could say that since I found this to be such a pain in the butt and didn't want to do it, I am the most evolved form of humanity. Lately, I've really been thinking that I'm a pain in the butt, myself.

Well, who cares about me? Right now, there was something I had to tell Isshiki. "When you're considering stuff like this, what people find annoying is when problems come up. So you should counter problems that already exist instead," I said and then pulled out from my bag the outline Tamanawa had made. "And in this situation, that means criticizing the flaws in this plan. It's okay, I can never think of how to bad-mouth myself, but I can bang out plenty of criticism of others. And this is your field of specialty, Isshiki. You can do it."

"Just what do you take me for…?"

"Come on, let's all try that together for a bit."

I had the grumbling Isshiki face the student council members across a table. Then I gave a little eye signal to Yukinoshita and Yuigahama, and we decided to supervise them silently for the moment.

Though we watched without saying anything, the student council did make an earnest effort to tackle the problem that had been presented to them. It wasn't like they were unmotivated.

Once they had a topic and an opportunity to converse, gradually, discussion emerged among the group, and steadily, their issues with the plan were raised. Occasionally, Isshiki or one of the others would even let slip a smile.

Yep, malicious gossip really is the best way to bring people together.

After waiting until they'd more or less brought up all the issues, I said to them, "Now we just have to work backward to come up with a plan."

Hearing a quiet mutter of "I see," I looked over to see Yukinoshita folding her arms. "…If that's the direction you're going, it seems you'll reach a plan. Though at the end of the day, we still have issues of funds, time, and people."

"We have no choice but to think up something that takes almost no money or time," I said.

"But if we don't spend money, then won't it wind up shabby in the end? I dunno about that…," Isshiki said, oozing dissatisfaction.

Yuigahama clapped her hands. "Oh, I know! Maybe something

like, the handmade feel is more homey! That kinda thing."

Hearing that, Yukinoshita made a very reasonable observation. "I think that's something the audience decides, not a selling point for those presenting the event."

But Yuigahama had a point.

Basically, what we needed was a change of ideas.

You can't just throw money at things. Movies that try to sell themselves on their production budget generally flop. Live-action adaptations of anime in particular. Nobody wants those, seriously.

How do you take the negative impressions of incomplete, mismatched, cut corners and make them come off positively as a "handmade feeling" and guileless? That was what we had to think about.

Oh, I guess it's maybe kinda like those amateur videos you have in the more adult-oriented genre of film… Because they're not pros, you can sense the awkwardness, the naturalness, the realness. It's within reach—in fact, it's the paradoxically literary nature of the extraordinary and secret within the mundane, the acting of not acting…*phew*. Yes, I basically get it.

"I got it," I said. "We take the elementary schoolers…and the preschoolers, too. Let's have the kids do stuff. That way, we can weaponize the cheapness and amateur feeling."

"…I see. That's quite a great idea." Yukinoshita lit up.

But the source of that idea being what it was, it was hard to look her in the eye, and I felt like my voice was ready to crack as I replied. "Huh? Uh, uh-huh, yeah. You know, it's like how sometimes when they don't know what to do for an ad, they just put animals and stuff in it, you know?"

But Yukinoshita was focused on gathering her thoughts and didn't look over at me again. "It's true; nobody would complain if we made it children's games… That would probably be well received by seniors, too. That restricts the sort of things we can do, though," she said, looking over at Isshiki and the student council.

"Oh yeah. Like songs or something…," replied Isshiki.

"Or a play…," added the clerk with the braids.

"Songs are the same thing as music, so…," the vice president said, crossing one thing off the list.

Now we'd just about decided what it was we were doing. I stood up and wrote out *theater* on the whiteboard. "Then a play. Preschools often put on casual plays for fun. They might have props

and costumes for that sort of thing," I said.

Yukinoshita nodded. "But then our problem will be the time to rehearse."

"I feel like they'd have a hard time memorizing lines…" Yuigahama sounded pretty woeful for someone who wasn't going to be onstage herself.

Yuigahama's bad at memorization, isn't she…? But this play wasn't an exam. We were allowed to pull a few sneaky moves.

"…We should have two groups. Actors on the stage and actors reading the lines," I said, and that seemed to click with Yukinoshita, too.

"You mean, like dubbing over their performance?"

"Yeah, then they don't have to remember any lines."

"That's amazing. You're exceptional at thinking up ways to cut corners."

I'm extremely delighted to be honored with such praise… Let's not say things like that with a pleasant smile on…

Well, being a real voice actor is a hell of a lot of work, though, and I hear you actually have to work really hard. We didn't have time for practice or rehearsals, but for this, we were talking about something on the level of a school arts festival, so this should be a viable option.

Now we basically had the gist of it. If we could actually get the work done, we should be able to pull it off.

"So I guess we're good with this…" Isshiki looked back at the student council with uncertainty. They all nodded back at her. Seeing that, a smile came to her lips.

"Since we've managed to come up with a plan," Yuigahama said cheerfully, "I hope we can make it happen!"

"Yeah. Wellll, I hope we can!"

"We should split the time for the event in half and do both our play and their concert. We can propose that at the meeting today," I said.

Yuigahama and Isshiki both tilted their heads with baffled looks. *What's with those dumb girl reactions…?*

"…Can we do that?" Isshiki said.

"I mean, I don't know. Even if we're doing this together, there are lots of different ways to go about it, right?"

"Uh-huh, I see…" Isshiki appeared distracted as she nodded, her expression indicating she wasn't convinced.

There's no such thing as something everyone likes. Therefore, some people won't like Tamanawa and his crowd's plan. If we could propose something for those people, we could raise the overall customer satisfaction of the event as a whole. Of course, not everyone would enjoy what we would arrange, but those people might be happy with Kaihin High School's plan.

It was our opposition of Kaihin that made it possible for us to draw up this scheme.

"Then work out the details before it's time for the meeting and do your best presenting it," I said and stood from my chair.

"All right… Wait, huh?! Where are you going?! And hey, am I doing the presenting?!" Isshiki's head jerked up, and she gave me a double take.

Yukinoshita stood up after me, brushing down her skirt as she put a pensive hand to her chin. "Of course, the presentation would be the domain of the student council. We're just helpers."

Yuigahama smiled, picking up her coat from her chair. "Oh, but you know—if you get into trouble during the meeting, Hikki and Yukinon'll help you!"

"You're not gonna help…? Well, Isshiki. Do your best. Snacks are on me today," I said and left the student council room.

There was still a while until the meeting, so I decided to kill some time shopping for snacks at the convenience store. We headed for the front entrance of the school.

"I hope the meeting will go well," Yuigahama said as she wrapped her scarf around her neck again.

"Well, I'm sure it'll be fine. If it doesn't go through, we'll force it. I want to be done with this thing already." I'd meant to say that casually, but Yuigahama's feet stopped right there. When I turned around, she was giving me a serious look.

"…Does that mean you're gonna do something, Hikki?"

Behind her, Yukinoshita had also stopped in place. Her eyes were slightly lowered, and I couldn't read the feelings behind them.

"…Well, I'll cross that bridge when we get to it. Frankly, I won't know unless we try." I answered as honestly as I could, within the range of what I could understand now. But I didn't know that many ways of doing things.

I'm sure Yuigahama must have understood that, too. She fussed with her bun, still looking down, and said, "Does that stuff…not bother you?"

“There are things that bother me.”

“So, then…,” she said, raising her head.

Before she could say everything that lay beyond that, I voiced my own answer. “…What bothers me is giving in to that sort of superficial discussion. That’s what bothers me the most,” I said, averting my eyes and scratching roughly at my head. Thinking back on how until just recently, I myself had been crushed by that sort of superficiality, I thought that was a pretty shameless thing for me to say.

But even so, I could no longer resign myself to accept the fake.

There was a momentary silence.

Then I heard a quiet sigh. When I looked back again, there was Yukinoshita, smiling faintly. “You should do as you like.” Her voice was softer than usual, and her words were straightforward and certain.

“…Yeah, okay.” Yuigahama seemed still not quite convinced, but she nodded silently nevertheless.

She probably hadn’t really understood. Or maybe she had just had enough.

I put the words together behind my teeth but never voiced them, returning her nod.

None of us said anything else as we went outside.

The setting sun filtering in between the school buildings as the winter sea blew through was just a bit warm.

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The meeting for the joint Christmas event began on schedule, and as time passed, things were cooling down.

The student council president of Kaihin High School, Tamanawa, smiled uncomfortably and sighed.

Whereupon the student council president of Soubu High School, Iroha Isshiki, grinned and whispered quietly to me where I sat next to her.

There had been a failure to reach an agreement in their conversation, which was something to this effect:

“Yes, that’s a valid way to look at things, but still, I think there’s significance in the two schools acting jointly. Operating

separately will weaken synergistic effect and perhaps pose double risk.”

“I mean, yeaaaaah, but personally, I’d really like to do this, you know? If the guests can see both shows, that’s a good deal, riiight?”

I didn’t know how many times we’d heard it, at this point.

Tamanawa would go on and on with all sorts of business jargon, while Isshiki would turn and tilt her head every time, acting cute and kittenish and saccharine.

The whole meeting had been like this.

At the beginning, Tamanawa had suggested splitting the additional costs among ourselves. In response, Isshiki had replied, “You knooow, I’ve just been thinking…,” and then slammed out the presentation of the theater plan like a counterpunch. But her enemy was also a formidable foe, and he’d presented a compromise involving the theater sandwiched into the intermissions of the current plan. Of course, Isshiki had suggested a two-part composition of music and theater, with the current content reduced, citing the current plan’s unresolved financial issues.

So far, things had been unfolding just as I’d anticipated. Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, and I could watch this at ease, as if watching a sort of preestablished harmony.

But now, the meeting had suddenly come to a standstill, and Isshiki and Tamanawa were repeating themselves.

Beside me, Yukinoshita sighed. *What a coincidence, I feel like that now, too.*

Taking care not to interrupt the meeting, she whispered to me, “Will Isshiki be all right…? I just heard her click her tongue…”

“I don’t know; she’s starting to look pissed…”

“I can understand that feeling…,” Yukinoshita said tiredly, then sighed again.

Yukinoshita and I had both come to this meeting with the intention of leaving the presentation to Isshiki and offering appropriate backup, but given the current standstill, we really couldn’t cut in.

While I wondered what to do, Yuigahama, sitting to my right, poke-poked me in the shoulder. “Hikki, why are they arguing?”

“…Imagine you’ve been working on a joint project with someone. If they suddenly said they were going to break off and do their own thing, what would you think?”

“Hmm…” Yuigahama considered, then said, “It’d feel like a bad

thing to me…”

“It’s true that a rift doesn’t come off well.” Yukinoshita nodded, too. That had to be what was bothering Tamanawa.

I glanced over at him to make sure and saw him furiously typing at his MacBook Air. Then he nodded and said, “I think that theater idea is a really good one. So circling back to the concept, one approach would be a collaboration between music and theater.”

Yet again, he offered a compromise plan, and Isshiki giggled. “Well, that is one idea, I guess? But I don’t really think that’s it, you know, and, like, also, there’s kind of that thing about the budget and stuff, riiight? So I dunno if we could do it in the end, you know?” she said, and then she put on this bashful, cheeky smile. But her eyes were not smiling at all.

“Let’s all think about that together. That’s what this meeting is for, after all.” Tamanawa repeated himself yet again. At this rate, we’d go into an infinite loop.

And then, out of the corner of my eye, I spotted someone unexpected standing up. It was our vice president. “Um, can I say something? Why is it you’re so opposed to this two-part configuration?”

“Hmm…I’m not *against* it. I think if we could share a vision, we could produce a greater sense of unity. And considering it from the standpoint of image strategy as well, I think it may be best not to eliminate the general framework of the joint event.” The counterargument from that surprising source made Tamanawa pause a bit before he continued. “Tentatively speaking, if we’re going to create two programs, one solution may be to integrate both schools to form two new groups…”

“But then I don’t think we’ll make it in time, you knooow? We’ve already got it ready on our end.” Isshiki joined in with the vice president. We hadn’t actually prepared anything, but she was probably telling a white lie to get us out of this morass.

Then one person from the Kaihin student council raised their hand, coming to Tamanawa’s aid. “If the issue is time, then we shouldn’t start over with a new program now. Keeping it to the original and having everyone work together on it would be a better idea, and it would be a more efficient use of funds, cost-performance-wise.”

And then, the meeting went backward again.

As I was making note of this exchange for the records, I realized

something wasn't adding up here.

Tamanawa wasn't against the two-part composition in and of itself, yet he was fixated on doing things together. What was the reason for that? In an effort to answer that question, I opened my mouth. "…Is it necessary for us to do this together?"

"Well, by doing it together, we produce group synergy to make a big event."

"There's no synergy going on here. You can talk about making things bigger all you want, but at this rate, we'll be lucky to pull off anything at all. So why are you still fixating on how we do this together?" Before I knew it, I was cross-examining him in an accusatory way. In return, I got critical whispers.

The greatest error of this meeting was that there had been no rejection. There'd been no opposition, right from the start. So even when we all knew something was wrong, nobody had been able to correct it.

I hadn't been able to reject their ideas, either. I'd let myself think it was a valid way of doing things.

I'd told myself I was being reserved, I was being considerate, but I'd been lying.

That wasn't right. I don't think it's at all a bad thing to be rejected.

Some things you can only understand once someone shows you why you're wrong. A hopeless, empty, and general affirmation of everything is the cruelest rejection of them all. I think that's the real dismissal.

Apparently flustered, Tamanawa hurriedly replied, "That's not in line with our plan, and besides, we received your consensus. And since we already shared the grand design…"

It was true that we'd agreed with them earlier, and they'd pulled together a "grand design"—and they'd forced everyone to accept it by claiming they were finding an answer to satisfy everyone. They'd forced us to keep out mouths shut, to swallow the poisonous lie.

That agreement had been obtained by coercively implying that the decision had already been made, and that those who disagreed were heretics.

And then when it failed, he said we all decided this together. He distributed the responsibility to lighten his own share in it, blaming a nameless other. That little postscript about how

“everyone” had decided was just manipulative; he made us into accomplices. Oh, it was like a certain hollow box.

That was why I had to reject this. I couldn’t say I was a righteous person at all, but because I had people who would be so good as to reject my suggestions, I’d realized my mistake. There was no way I could accept this conclusion. I knew I was in the wrong. But the world is more wrong.

I fixed my gaze on Tamanawa, and my mouth formed an ugly smirk. “…No. You only thought you could do it, and you let your ego get the better of you. You couldn’t face your error. You wanted to avoid your own failure, so you did what you could to put your mind at ease—forming plans, throwing around words, and getting promises. When you make a mistake, it’s easier to make it someone else’s fault.”

It was just like how a certain someone had been recently, and self-deprecation tinged my voice.

A kind little world with no rejection is so pleasant. Superficial discussions are left in the meeting records, and you can still have something that looks like a meeting. You can deceive yourself that way.

But it’s fake.

It started with murmurs, then a swell of voices. The ripples reverberated quietly, but slowly spreading. The voices swirled like a whirlpool around me, and I could see the chill in their eyes.

“I don’t think that’s what’s going on here. I think there’s just a lack of communication.”

“We could have a cooldown period and then try to have a calm discussion…”

The voices from the Kaihin side were cold and persistent. But at the end of the day, they were not changing their attitudes. They were trying to tangle us up with their word tentacles to appease us, avoiding rejection of our proposal.

But a voice ripped through the stalemate.

“If you want to play make-believe, then could you do it elsewhere?”

Her voice wasn’t loud, but with that one remark, the room went dead silent.

The owner of that voice quickly continued. “Everything you’ve been saying has been completely void of content. Do you enjoy pretending to have a discussion using your new vocabulary?”

Aside from Yukino Yukinoshita, not a single person opened their mouth.

She continued at a slower, deliberate pace. “You’re speaking purely in the abstract so that you can pat yourself on the back for your discussion and understanding, but you haven’t carried anything into action. You can’t possibly move forward like that… You won’t create anything, you won’t gain anything, you won’t give anything… Nothing that’s real, at least.”

When I looked over, she was squeezing her fists and looking down.

But when she lifted her face, her expression was dignified, and her strong gaze was faced forward. “Could you not waste any more of our time?”

It felt like the lecture room had forgotten sound. Everyone was left speechless by Yukinoshita’s intensity. A void was born in the circular discussion.

“Um, this all seems kind of complicated, so wouldn’t it be better to think of this as twice the fun instead of being forced to do things together? It’ll bring out what makes each of our schools special.” Yuigahama started speaking, making an effort to sound cheerful as she wove into that gap. She turned the discussion to everyone else still sitting there, stunned. “Right, Iroha-chan?”

“Oh, yeah. I—I think that’s a good idea…”

Then Yuigahama’s gaze shifted over to Kaori Orimoto. “Wh-what do you think? Hmm?”

“Huh? Uh, yeah… That’s fine…right?” Orimoto replied to that interrogative surprise attack with a reflexive agreement. She seemed to lack confidence in her answer, and she also shared a look with the person sitting beside her. That person nodded back.

When an assembly operates without dissent, once the balance tilts toward affirmation of an idea, it all comes down like an avalanche.

Finally, an end came to the long, long meeting.

X X X

The discussion came to a close, and the lecture room bubbled with chatter once more. Since a conclusion had been reached among the

Soubu crew as well as in the united group, we could finally start preparing for the event in earnest. Books and materials were spread out over the tables, and we started up a meeting to plan the play.

I observed this out of the corner of my eye as I stood with Yukinoshita while Isshiki vented her anger at us. Yuigahama was watching with a strained smile.

“Why did the two of you have to say stuff like thaaat? Ugh, now it’s so tense? I thought the whole event would go up in smoke.” Isshiki was in front of the whiteboard, arms folded. Her little pout was cunning in its cuteness.

“I don’t believe I said anything that was mistaken, though.” Yukinoshita turned her head away sullenly.

Isshiki huffed with displeasure. “Maybe you were right, but you could have been more tactful about it, like, read the room, you know?” she complained, and Yukinoshita turned away again.

Or so I thought, but then for some reason, her gaze shifted to me. “There’s no point in expecting him to read the room. All he ever reads during club time is lines of text.”

“Too bad for you, when you get to be a reader at my level, you can even read between the lines. And wait, weren’t you the one she was chewing out here?” I said.

Yukinoshita tilted her head, baffled. “I just acknowledged she was right, didn’t I? There’s no reason for her to be angry.”

“Ahhh, that’s what she’s getting mad at you for. Listen to her, come on,” I shot back, and Isshiki knock-knocked on the whiteboard.

“Um, are you listening to me? I’m talking to the both of you, you know?”

“C-come on, it all worked out in the end, so no big deal, right?” Yuigahama finally intervened. Isshiki sighed again and withdrew. She looked a little sulky, so Yuigahama started patching things over. “The event didn’t go up in smoke, so it’s all good. Right?”

“…Agh, well, I guess things sort of worked out, and besides, well…that did kind of feel good.”

She just can’t admit it. And this is coming from me, a twisted person.

But I’d thought Isshiki didn’t care about student council work at all, so I was surprised she was concerned about whether the event would happen or not.

And now, she was moaning and holding her head. “But those

are two different things, aren't they? This is really hard to manage."

"Oh, well, sorry about that." I was basically at fault on that front, so I would apologize for that. Thus far, the ones to negotiate directly with Tamanawa had been Isshiki and myself, but with what had happened, I doubted he'd want to talk to me. Therefore, everything would fall on Isshiki's shoulders.

"It's true; it would be uncomfortable if we couldn't cooperate anymore… Even if we are working on two different projects, we're doing it under a single framework. I wonder if we've made things a little difficult to manage…" Yukinoshita put her hand to her jaw thoughtfully, and Yuigahama raised her hand like she suddenly had an idea.

"Me and Iroha-chan will handle anything related to helping Kaihin and communicating with them."

"Whaaat, me too?" Isshiki said. She clearly wasn't into that idea.

But Yukinoshita instantly reprimanded her. "You're the representative, so of course."

"Y-yes'm! …Hey, wait, this is your fault, Yukinoshita…" When Yukinoshita shot her a sharp look, Isshiki cleared her throat to hide her discomfort, then she whispered in my ear, "Hey, Yukinoshita is scary…"

I couldn't say, *No, that's her way of being kind*. I mean, she was still glaring at Isshiki. Yukinoshita's got some devil ears straight from hell…

"Isshiki," said Yukinoshita, "could you confirm their budget and their time allotment for me? Also, I would like to do the exact calculation of the expenses thus far."

"Oh, then why don't we do that with the treasurer?" Isshiki said, and the two of them went over to where the rest of the student council were.

I didn't have anything else to do at the moment, so I pulled out a nearby chair, leaned against the backrest, and stared at the ceiling. No one came over to me, and I spent some time off in my own world.

Occasionally, I felt eyes on me. I'd thought I was quite used to strange looks and whispering voices, but this was the first in a while that I'd been conscious of them, so it felt strangely nostalgic. Those eyes were on Yukinoshita, too.

"Hikigaya." I didn't know when she'd come in, but Miss

Hiratsuka was looking down on me from above.

"You were here?"

"I came partway through to see how things were going." She didn't take a chair, so I doubted she was staying long. Instead, I decided to stand and avoid the awkwardness of being the only one sitting. Miss Hiratsuka brought her face near mine and gave me a close look and a wry smile. "Sounds like you made yourself rather conspicuous again."

Oh, so she was here earlier, huh…? I squirmed a bit, mildly embarrassed that she saw that.

Miss Hiratsuka scanned the lecture room. Her gaze pointed to Yukinoshita. "But I didn't think she would do what she did… I'm a little surprised."

"Well, yeah…," I said to indicate I was listening, not necessarily agreeing. I couldn't find the right words.

Regardless, Miss Hiratsuka nodded back at me and murmured, "If you're getting hurt together, maybe that's not an injury at all… Beauty in dissonance, I suppose."

"Huh?" I asked, not understanding her meaning.

Without looking at me, she said, "You might be hurt or warped…or twisted, but in the eyes of someone who knows what to look for, it's a beautiful thing. There is real value there… I have some appreciation for things like that." Then she turned back to me with concern in her eyes. "But it can also be scary. You wonder if this is really for the best. Some might say that a joy no one understands is a closed joy."

"Is that a bad thing, then?" I asked her.

But she slowly shook her head. Her long, glossy black hair swayed. "I don't know… A teacher can only verify your answers on school tests… So I'll continue to ask you questions, at least. And you keep mulling them over."

Leaving that remark behind her, Miss Hiratsuka left the lecture room. Watching her go, I searched for the words to reply to her.

I think what I wanted was not a relationship that general society considered correct. It was more like grabbing someone's hand and dragging them down to the bottom of the water. It was an incredibly selfish sentimentality.

She didn't have to tell me. I would continue to always ask and answer.

X X X

Ending the long day, I started on the road home, lazily pedaling my bike from the community center.

When I came close to my neighborhood, I heard the ring of a bell from behind. Thinking, *What? Ugh, some obnoxious rider coming along*, I yielded the path to them and took the course to the side. But the bell didn't stop dinging.

Now I was getting annoyed, and I turned around.

There was Orimoto on her bicycle, following right behind me. When she saw my face, she chuckled. "Why're you ignoring me? You're so funny."

"…Hey. Uh, it's not that funny, though."

We were from the same middle school, so if you thought about it, it was obvious: My house wasn't that far from Orimoto's. If we were heading from the same place and going in the same direction, and returning around the same time frame, you don't have to be Takashi from the math textbook to guess we might meet somewhere.

Orimoto's bicycle rolled up beside mine. "So you still live around here," she noted.

"Uh, yeah, this is where my family lives…"

"Oh, of course. It's just that we never see each other."

That's because there's a ton of people I don't want to see, and I avoid going out… Speaking of the list of people I didn't want to see, Orimoto was pretty high up there, but I didn't have to tell her that.

"Oh, hold on a sec," she said, stopping her bicycle in front of a vending machine. She was also pretty high up on the list of people I didn't want to wait for, too, but since she'd asked me to, I couldn't not do it. Still astride my bike, I obediently stayed there while Orimoto bought a drink from the vending machine.

"Here, my treat," she said as she held out warm black tea in a can.

What, it's not MAX Coffee? But still, I couldn't quibble over a present, so I accepted it obediently.

Then she raised up the other can she'd bought. "Yaaay!"

"O-okay…"

She must have meant that to be a cheers, as she clinked our cans. She opened her can with a *fshht* and took a slow sip. "You've

changed a little, Hikigaya," she said. "You were so boring back in middle school."

"I—I see…" *H-hmm. S-so that's what she thought of me. Was that information necessary?*

I was more bothered by her remark that I'd changed a little. Had I changed since middle school? I must have. I'd grown taller, and I'd memorized more English vocab. And plus, I didn't start weirdly gushing sweat when I talked with Orimoto anymore. I'm sure there were a number of other things that had changed, but it might be more accurate to say that I was just returning to the starting point.

"Maybe when someone seems boring, a lot of that's the fault of the one looking." As she said it, she looked bored herself. Then shaking up her black tea, she tossed it back and exhaled a satisfied *ahhh*. "But I could really never date you, after all."

"Uh, I'm not exactly asking you to do that now…" *Yes, I did ask a long time ago. Yes, it was very long ago, ancient history. It was so very long ago, so please forget it. Please.*

"So like, what's this about, all of a sudden?" I asked.

"Like today, you suddenly came out and said something, right? Normally, I would hate it if my boyfriend did that, you know? I just didn't even get what that was about." She cackled, as if the memory was amusing. But then suddenly her laughter settled, and she looked farther down the road—in the direction of our old middle school. "But as a friend, maybe it'd be okay. It was funny, after all… Well, it doesn't really matter," she said. Then she tossed her empty can into the garbage bin and threw her leg over her bicycle. "But, like, thanks to you and that girl, we're actually getting into this whole thing now. The president's really motivated and stuff. We're gonna win this thing."

"Uh, it's not a competition…," I said.

Orimoto tilted her head. "Is that right? Well, whatever. See you."

"Yeah. Oh, thanks for the tea."

Orimoto casually waved a hand in response and started pedaling away. I drank down the remaining tea all at once and threw the empty can into the garbage.

Then not too far away, I heard bicycle brakes squeak. "Hey."

"Yeah?" I looked over toward the voice that had addressed me to see Orimoto still on her bike, only her head turned toward me.

“Next time there’s an alumni party or something, why don’t you come, Hikigaya?”

“No way.”

“Thought so. You’re so funny.”

“No, I’m really not…”

She giggled and started pedaling again.

I pressed down on my pedals to head off in the other direction. I didn’t watch her go.

X X X

One day later, after classes had ended, the lecture room of the community center was bustling. We’d decided we would put on a play, but we hadn’t settled on which one.

Isshiki had offered one mysterious instruction—“But there’s gonna be angels, right?”— and so we were hastily making angel costumes. *Will there really be angels…? Wait, doesn’t that mean the characters are dead?*

The elementary school kids became a powerful new ally in this production task, despite having been treated entirely like a troublesome burden until just the other day. Now, they were able bodies. Man, elementary schoolers really are the best!

Of the kids, Rumi Tsurumi was adept with her hands, and her lonerdom meant she could focus on a task, too. That, along with the precedent of her being the one to come to us for directions on the first day the kids had visited, made her the ace of the elementary schooler odd-jobs team.

While the other kids were chatting and fooling around together, she was now diligently making angel costumes. Watching her from afar, I thought her earnestness would be her downfall, as the other kids were forcing more and more work on her.

That’s really a bit much for her to handle by herself… So I approached her, sitting down next to her without asking, and reached out to the tools for making angel costumes.

But a voice stopped my hand. “I can do it alone.”

“Uh, sure, but still…” Despite her claims, we had to make quite a few of these. They were sized for preschool kids, so they weren’t that big, but it was a lot for one person to handle.

But Rumi shook her head. “I’m fine.”

“…I see. You can do it alone, huh?”

She was serious about trying to make everything herself. Maybe she was just stubborn. Maybe in the end, she wouldn’t make it in time, and it’d cause us all trouble.

But regardless, I think her effort was noble.

She glanced over at me as I pulled out my chair with a scrape and got to my feet. There was something sad about her expression, and gradually, her eyes lowered.

Still standing, I tapped my own chest. “But I can do it *more* alone,” I said.

Rumi stared blankly at me for a bit, but then suddenly, she gave an exasperated little laugh. “What’s that supposed to mean? That’s so stupid,” she said with a faint smile, and she didn’t stop me from working after that. The two of us went through cardboard boxes with scissors, making wing after wing.

I think cooperation and trust are probably actually way colder than people imagine.

It’s okay to do things alone; in fact, you have to be able to do them alone. Once you’re able to live without causing trouble for others, you finally become able to request things of others for the first time. When you have the ability to have a life separate from others, you earn the right to walk alongside someone for the first time.

It’s that ability to have a life alone, the ability to manage by yourself, that enables you to live together with someone.

I glanced over at Rumi, who was diligently working next to me. She’d probably be able to have a life alone, too. If she could do this much in elementary school, she was in great shape. And besides, she was decently cute, too. Someday, she could walk together with someone. Then for the sake of her future…it might be good for her to do a rehearsal, just once.

“…So hey, will you star in our play, kid?” I asked, snipping away at the cardboard.

Rumi’s scissors stopped flat, and she glared at me. “…My name’s not *kid*.”

“Hmm?” *What’s with that sudden glare? Is she, like, one of those things? Those ghosts from the scary stories, like when you’re sleeping at a* ryokan *and they come up to your pillow to peer at your face?*

“Rumi,” she said a little grumpily, then turned away. Guess she

wanted me to call her that.

I don't really feel comfortable calling girls by their first names…partly because it's embarrassing, but I also worry that just by calling her by her first name, people will think, *Huh? What, has she gotten a boyfriend?*

While I was wondering what to do about this, Rumi glared at me, then returned to her task.

Looks like she won't react until I say her name, huh…?

"Hey…Rumi?" I said to her.

With her eyes still down on the table, she gave me a tiny nod.

"Will you star in our play?"

Get on out there, you! And then do Aikatsu with me! You've got a pretty face, so you'll be great, just great! Let me be your producer, come on. Let's start some serious idol activity together.

I don't know whether my passion reached her or not, but Rumi seemed to consider as she said, "…Are you allowed to decide that, Hachiman?"

"What? Yeah, I'm something like a producer here."

I'm also an admiral and a Love-Liver. I didn't know whether it was okay for me to decide this on my own, but we had decided to put the elementary and preschool kids in this play, so there should be no problem.

Rumi stared at me vacantly, looking thoughtful, but then she jerked her face away. "Hmph…," she said with apparent disinterest. "I guess I could do it."

"For real? Thanks, Rumi-Rumi."

"It's gross when you call me that."

I wonder, could this be how a father feels when his daughter calls him gross…? What a surprising thrill. Whoa, this is nice.

As this mysterious feeling enveloped me, while sticking white paper onto the cardboard, Rumi asked me, "What's the play?"

"…Oh yeah, we haven't decided yet, huh?" I figured the student council would probably be talking about that, but it'd be best to confirm that and get a handle on our progress.

As I was thinking about this, Rumi tugged at the cardboard in my hands. "Maybe you should decide that soon," she offered cheekily.

It seemed her implication was that I should leave this to her and go on ahead. Well, if she was going to be like that, then I had to go. I decided to send some personnel her way and do what I

would do.

"…Right, then. See you," I said and stood, heading for where the Soubu crowd was working.

I went to check with Isshiki first, but while I was looking for her, Yuigahama came over with a manila envelope. "Hikki, do you know where Iroha-chan or Yukinon went?"

"I'm looking for them, too."

"Oh. I got the money, so I was wondering what we should do."

Oh-ho, so she's seized the funds Kaihin's been taking care of, huh? I don't really know, but despite being an idiot, she does seem to take proper care when it comes to money. How domestic…

As Yuigahama and I were glancing around for Isshiki, the door of the lecture room opened with a rattle. The president in question staggered over.

"What happened to you…?" I asked her.

She was acting miserable. "I asked Hayama for help, and he said no…"

"What? No way! He did?" Yuigahama seemed to have not expected that at all. I was a little surprised, too—that Hayama had refused a request from someone, but most of all, that Isshiki had boldly gone on the attack, even after he had rejected her. *Man, Hayama really said no, huh…?*

Isshiki was sniffling, eyes sadly lowered, but gradually, the corners of her mouth turned up in a smirk. Then she lifted her face, grinning wide. "Just kidding! This means Hayama's really got me on the brain, doesn't it? Whoa, this is having even mooore of an effect than I predicted!"

"Yeah, sure…," I said with some exasperation. *She's indomitable. If this is a natural reaction for her, then that's pretty impressive, and if she's faking, then she really is indomitable.*

"Oh, that reminds me. He said that he'd come on the day of," Isshiki added with a nonchalant look.

Yuigahama turned to me. "Oh, is that right? Then can I invite someone, too?"

"Yeah, sounds fine, not like I care."

"…Indeed, you never seem to care about what you say." I heard an exasperated voice behind me. I turned around to see Yukinoshita standing there—I didn't know when she'd shown up.

Yukinoshita began talking with Yuigahama and Isshiki, saying hello, chatting, and giving instructions, but occasionally, tiny little

yawns would surface.

"You look tired," I commented.

"I haven't slept. I've had things to do…," she answered briefly.

But what was it that she stayed up all night to do? What indeed?

As I was wondering about that, Yukinoshita started pulling some things from her bag and gave the student council president a sharp look. "Isshiki."

"Y-yes…"

Perhaps due to lack of sleep, the look in Yukinoshita's eyes was more knifelike than usual. Isshiki twitched, as if she was scared Yukinoshita might get angry at her again.

Seeing her reaction, Yukinoshita suddenly smiled. Then she held a stack of papers out to her. "I've put these together. If it seems they're of helpful reference, please use them."

"Okay…"

I took a peek at the pages when Isshiki accepted them. It appeared to be a checklist and materials. The checklist was a summary of things that should be completed by the day of the event, as well as necessary items.

Wondering about what the other papers were, I discovered it was advice from Yukinoshita. She had recommended the student council prepare something to compensate the children who would participate in the play; plus she had added recipes for Christmas cake and gingerbread cookies as well as calculations on the cost of materials. It also summarized when the kitchens in the school and community center were available.

As advice for the play, she'd written about scripts for a form of theater that included audience participation. *Oh, is this like that thing? Like how in the PreCure movies, you can use the Miracle Lights to support them?*

Isshiki, Yuigahama, and I were all impressed, murmuring "Ohhh" and "Ahhh" and "Hmm" as we read along.

That must have made Yukinoshita a little uncomfortable, because she cleared her throat and pulled something else out of her bag. "This, too." She held a number of books and handed them over to Isshiki. "I'm not sure if these will be to your taste, but I've picked out some of the Christmas classics. Also, among the student council room equipment, there should be a CD of noncopyrighted music, so go look for it. I think you'll need it for the play."

"…Th-thank you." Isshiki looked bewildered, frozen with those

books and papers in hand. It was no wonder she was surprised, getting handed all this stuff so suddenly. But I was also a little surprised at how Yukinoshita had arranged this much for her.

"You've really done a lot," I said without thinking.

Yukinoshita turned her face away. "Because I can't deal with people the way you and Yuigahama do," she said.

Yuigahama and I looked at each other. Then I smiled a little. Maybe Yukinoshita was actually pretty concerned about Isshiki. She's way too opaque!

"Now I suppose we've dealt with most of the difficulties…" Yukinoshita folded her arms and put her hand to her jaw. Apparently, there was something else.

I considered it, too, but it seemed like we were ready to pick a play now, so the only remaining barrier would be the issue of work time. "Well, basically," I replied.

"Right." Yukinoshita exhaled in satisfaction before immediately turning to Isshiki. "…Isshiki, I believe you should assume leadership for the rest. Can I take it you agree, Hikigaya?"

"Yeah. Not like I was ever leading anything in the first place." All I'd been doing was putting out fires, and I hadn't done anything you could call leadership. There hadn't been a leader, in the correct sense of the word, until now.

"Ummm…" Isshiki shifted her gaze between me and Yukinoshita, opening her mouth anxiously.

Yukinoshita forestalled her. "I don't mind if you give me instructions. I'll participate in the work as well. And if you get in trouble, you can turn to us."

"But, um…I still really don't think I can, you knooow?" Isshiki laughed, embarrassed.

Yukinoshita closed her eyes and slowly shook her head. "You can do it. There's someone who recommended you for this position —I think you can believe in him." Her tone was kind.

Quietly, Isshiki replied, "All right."

10

The lights in each of their palms illuminate…

It was time for another Christmas—well, technically Christmas Eve, still. But finally, the day of the joint Christmas event held by the student councils of Soubu and Kaihin High Schools arrived.

Two days before had been the ceremony for the end of the term, which was a half day, and yesterday had been a holiday. Blessed by time to get work done, the progress situation wasn't bad.

The event started in the afternoon, so we had the whole morning to prepare. Under Isshiki's instructions, we spent the time desperately baking cakes. Since we'd been prepping for this from morning to night the day before, I think we were even starting to smell like cake.

But if you're wondering whether the atmosphere was sweet, too, I can assure you, it was not. The kitchen of the community center was tense.

And the one who had become the master of this cooking room and was currently working at the kitchen counter was Yukinoshita.

"Hikigaya." She called my name, but no words followed after that.

I assumed she probably meant for me to pass over the whipped cream I was holding. *Come on, give me proper instructions…*, I thought, but I handed over the bowl anyway. "Here."

"Thank you." Accepting it, she started spreading the whipped cream on the cake, then addressed Yuigahama, who was working to the side. "Yuigahama, are you done packing the cookies I put into bags?"

"Yeah, I just finished. Should I bake a cake, too?" Yuigahama asked Yukinoshita. Her shoulders must have been stiff, because she was rotating them as she stood up.

Her hands still moving, Yukinoshita answered instantly. "It's all right. Under no circumstances do you touch the cakes. Under no circumstances."

“That’s kinda mean!”

“Anyway, I’ve left the batter to rest in the school fridge, so could you get it for me?” Yukinoshita said, never pausing in her work as she smoothly ignored Yuigahama’s wailing.

“Okay! …Wait, is it tired or something?”

“It’s a figure of speech. I put it in there, so could you go get it for me?” Yukinoshita was busy that day, so she didn’t have the time to be dealing with Yuigahama. Poor, poor Gahama. Things really were super-busy in there, and even now the oven was dinging. The kitchen was at full operation.

“Why is it ‘resting’…?,” Yuigahama muttered, about to leave the kitchen when the door hesitantly opened with a soft rattle.

And poking his head in was Totsuka.

“Huh? What is it, Sai-chan?” asked Yuigahama.

“Oh, I asked someone from the student council, and they said you were here. I wanted to pitch in a little. You know?” Totsuka said. When he turned back, Komachi also leaned around the door, waving at me. I’d mentioned to her that it’d be nice if she could show up, just as a break from studying, but I hadn’t actually expected her to come. What’s more, I got the feeling I could hear this strange throat-clearing sound of *gefum, gefum, okopon* from behind them, but I decided not to pay attention to it.

“Can Komachi help, too, Bro?” Komachi offered, coming into the kitchen with Totsuka.

“Oh, it’s Totsuka and Komachi. Hello.” Yukinoshita greeted them, and they both replied with hellos.

“She says they’re both gonna help,” I said.

Yuigahama clapped her hands and turned back to Totsuka. “Then, Sai-chan, can you come with me to the school? Apparently, it’s sitting down, so I might not be able to carry it by myself.”

“Yeah, sure… What’s sitting down?” Despite his confusion over Yuigahama’s disturbing explanation, Totsuka left the kitchen with her.

I wonder if they’ll manage to bring over the batter… I’m almost as uneasy about this as I would be about a kid’s first errand…

“Then I suppose I’ll ask you to handle this, Komachi,” said Yukinoshita. “Which are you better at, cookies or cake?”

“Komachi can do either!”

For her part, Yukinoshita was trying to get Komachi to help bake.

“I see; that’ll be a big help. So then please handle the gingerbread cookies. The recipe is over there.”

“Okay! Baking with Yukino… This is taking a lot of things to the next level! Komachi’s so happy!”

What’s being taken to the next level? Come on. Komachi washed her hands, then immediately started making things with Yukinoshita.

Watching with a nod as the two girls baked and chatted pleasantly together, I once again heard a throat-clearing sound, this time like *gefum, gefum, morusua*, coming from nearby. Is that a throat-clearing sound?

I guess I can’t ignore him when he’s this close… Resigned, I turned toward the throat-clearing. And right there behind me was Zaimokuza.

“Gefum, gefum.”

“Zaimokuza, carry these boxes of cookies with me.”

“A-aye… Should I explain why ’tis I have come to this place?”

“No, I don’t care, so it’s whatever. Oh, and help me carry the rest of the spread, too.”

“O-okay…” Zaimokuza helped me carry in the boxes with surprising obedience, and we worked together for a while.

X X X

Finally, the curtain rose on the joint Christmas event.

Peeking in from the wings of the stage, I saw a big crowd. Komachi, Totsuka, and Zaimokuza were sitting in the audience, too. Close to them, I also caught sight of Kawasaki, as well as Hayama and his friends. Kawasaki had certainly come to see her little sister. Hayama and company must have been invited by Isshiki and Yuigahama.

Kaihin’s program was currently going on in the venue hall.

A Kaihin student band was performing, and they’d hired people for a classical music concert, too. It was quite smaller than their original plan, but still, the audience’s reactions were positive.

The narrower focus, combined with the contrast between the band and the classical performance, pleased the audience. All the performers received thunderous applause.

Then it was about time for Soubu High School's play.

Now I had the role of the super-sub performing odd jobs, with no particular position. There wasn't much work to be done, so I was hanging around. Isshiki and the student council had caused one problem after another and made various mistakes, but it seemed they were also managing to resolve those on their own.

Having nothing to do, I was zoning out in the wings of the stage when nearby, I heard a deep breath in and out. I looked over to see Isshiki peeking out at the audience nervously.

"How are things going?" I asked her.

She turned around and sighed. "Oh, hey. Agh, it's a big mess."

"You put together a good script, and the only part where you stumbled during the rehearsals was setup, right? I don't think you have to worry so much," I said.

Isshiki puffed out her chest proudly. "Yeah, 'cause our clerk worked hard on that script. Also…you guys helped us with a lot of things… Ah! Oh yeah, I've got to go over to the others now!" she added quickly at the end as if she was trying to hide her shyness before pattering off.

Then, after leaving the stage wings, she spun around back to me. "Oh, please check with the vice president for the timing at the end. And I'll be counting on you to handle the cakes."

"Roger, President," I replied briefly and watched Isshiki head off to the others of the student council.

X X X

And then the curtain rose onstage.

We lowered the audience lights but didn't turn on the stage lighting yet.

"One dollar and eighty-seven cents… That was all…" The narrator's voice echoed in the darkness. Then the lights went up onstage, and Rumi, wearing a blonde wig, was sorrowfully counting change, overwhelmed.

The narration continued. "Yes, only a dollar and eighty-seven cents—and tomorrow was Christmas."

The first scene was a familiar one.

From the various books Yukinoshita had given her, Isshiki had

chosen “The Gift of the Magi.” It was a short one and didn’t have many characters. What’s more, because the narration was the bulk of the story, the burden on individual actors was light, so there was no need to bother dividing the play into stage actors and line readers. Considering the little time we had to prepare, this was the best choice. I had honestly been a little surprised she’d selected something even better than my suggestion.

Compared with Kaihin’s production, it was a plain performance and had an entirely handmade feel to it. We’d done our best with the costume choices and such, but still, it was no better than what you’d see at a school arts festival.

On the stage, Rumi stood in front of a mirror undoing her braided hair, but eventually, she put on her coat and hat, then disappeared into the wings of the stage.

The stage went dark, and when the lights returned, the stage resembled a town on Christmas. Paper and paint had transformed cardboard and plywood into backdrops of brick buildings, and placed in the center was the Christmas tree we’d brought inside. Surrounded by the backdrops, the tree looked even bigger.

Then the scene changed, and a spotlight hit a sign in large letters: MADAM SOFRONJI, ALL THE HAIR SUPPLIES YOU NEED! Onstage were Rumi and one other girl dressed as the store proprietor.

Rumi took a step forward and gulped. And then, throat trembling, summoning her courage, she spoke.

“…Could you…buy my hair?” She said the line.

She really is idol material… I wanted to watch the whole thing, but I couldn’t.

After watching to this scene, I left the hall.

X X X

Upon returning to the community center kitchen, I found Yukinoshita slumped in a chair and Yuigahama munching away on some cookies. *Uh, those cookies are for the gift bags at the end…* Well, if there was extra, it was fine.

“Hey. Did you finish all the cakes?” I asked.

Yukinoshita pointed to the counter. “We made it in time, somehow… How is the play going?”

“Good. It’s about time to carry in the last one.” I lifted the final cake. Yuigahama finished her last cookie, dusted off her hands, and stood, and Yukinoshita followed.

“I wish I could’ve seen the play, too,” Yuigahama lamented.

“You can see the last scene, so that works out, right?” I suggested. “Let’s go.” And then with the final cake in hand, we went up the stairs, carrying it to the hall. We’d already carried in the other finished cakes.

In front of the double doors to the hall were a few of the preschool kids and the day care workers. The vice president was also there with an earpiece on, sticking close to the doors.

“It’s time,” he said. “Counting on you to get it ready.”

“Right,” I replied. I entrusted my cake to Yuigahama, then put my hand on the door opposite the vice president. During a certain scene, we would open both doors at the same time.

Cracking open the doors to peek at the stage, I saw they were approaching the final scene.

“Then put the pork chops on the stove,” said the kid who played the husband, and they had a modest Christmas dinner onstage. What followed was a narration by the other elementary school kids.

“Of all the people giving gifts, these two were the wisest.”

“Of all the people who exchange gifts, the wisest are the ones who would do the same.”

“No matter where you are in the world, people like this are the true magi.”

“…So from us to them, and to all of you. We offer the gift of our hearts…”

“Merry Christmas!”

The overlapping narration of many voices concluded the story, and then, an angel popped out onstage.

“Merry Christmaaaaas!”

Appearing from the wings of the stage was Kawasaki’s little sister, Keika. She was wearing an angel costume and carrying a cake. Glancing over at the audience, I saw Kawasaki watching her nervously. *Are you her mom, or what?*

The entrance of the adorable angel made the audience excitedly exclaim, “Ohhh!”

That moment, the vice president and I exchanged an eye signal, and without missing a beat, we opened up the doors to the hall.

Preschool kids in angel costumes came in holding cakes, just like Keika. The itty-bitty angels carried the cakes to the seniors in the audience seats. The cuteness of the little kids made the seniors burst into smiles.

But the performance wasn't over yet.

"Merry Christmas!"

On the stage, Keika, Rumi, and the kid who played the husband lit candles, then went around lighting the candles the angel preschoolers had distributed.

The candles onstage and the ones held by assistants in the audience were lit at nearly the same time. The only electric lighting now was the single spotlight onstage. One by one, the angels ignited the tiny flames in the audience, spreading to fill the whole hall with warm, soft light that brought stage and audience together.

As the audience become part of this singular spectacle, sighs could be heard from their seats. The same went for the three of us, watching from the back of the hall.

"…Well, I'd give it a passing grade," Yukinoshita muttered, watching beside me. Despite her remark, she had a rather broad smile on her face. She just can't be honest about these things.

The essence of service is the degree of the audience's satisfaction. A one-time diversion hinges on their level of satisfaction as it happens. It's only enjoyed once, so the experience of the mood in that moment is enough.

This was the answer Isshiki had arrived at, using Yukinoshita's suggestions.

I was impressed she'd planned this. I guess this is the Destiny Land effect? Hey, wait…

"Oh, this is so nice, like a something-or-other-*fire*," Yuigahama said, pulling out an English word.

Yukinoshita replied calmly with the correct English terminology, "It's a *candlelight service*."

"Did you mix that up with *campfire*?" I asked Yuigahama.

"Th-they're similar, right?" she retorted indignantly, and I smiled wryly at her.

Then onstage, the curtain call began. The performers and narrators were called in and introduced, and then they bowed.

When angel Keika came out, Kawasaki was taking pictures like mad. *Seriously, are you her mom or something?*

Then at the end, the star of the show emerged. The particularly

loud applause seemed to confuse her, but when everyone onstage joined hands, Rumi took a big bow.

At the very back of the hall, beyond the candlelight of the audience seats, I was watching now. I found myself tearing up a bit at Rumi's big moment. I feel blessed as her producer, seriously.

I'll never forget this performance today!

After that, we shifted right into a Christmas party, with tea, cake, and gingerbread cookies as refreshments. Both the Kaihin and Soubu students pecked at the cakes as they chatted with one another. We staff members joined the party as we took turns serving the little kids and the seniors. I also walked through the hall checking for empty cups or utensils to take away.

When I looked around, my eyes caught Tamanawa's as he was eating cake. He swept his bangs aside with his fingers and turned away. Nearby, Orimoto was clinking paper cups with her friends and laughing.

Close to the stage by Hayama and his friends was a little crowd of people. It seemed he'd been discovered by the elementary school kids. He was just as popular as he had been during that camping trip.

And surprisingly, Rumi was among them.

I don't know what she was talking about with Hayama and the others.

But the smile on her face then didn't cause an ache in my chest. It lit a small yet warm light, like a faint candle.

X X X

I walked through the school building at dusk.

By the time we were done finishing the event and tidying up, it had gotten pretty late.

While cleaning up, we'd carried the tools and other things we'd used for the event to the student council room, but that place was already overflowing with Isshiki's personal effects. We had nowhere to store them.

I had tried to throw away the tinsel and ornaments, but since Isshiki had insisted we might use them someday, we were holding on to them. That's such a classic example of failure to clean up, you

know… Left with no choice, we wound up temporarily dumping it in the Service Club room, a task I'd left to Yukinoshita and Yuigahama.

After that, I'd been forced to help organize the student council room, but I'd finally been released from that duty. Now I'd go report to the other two back in the clubroom that I'd finished, and then we'd go home.

Because winter break had begun, no one was walking through the hallway of the special-use building except for me. The sound of my footsteps rang particularly loud in the quiet hallway.

I put my hand on the door of the clubroom. That moment, a nice smell wafted toward me. When I went inside, it was a little warm.

"Oh, welcome back."

"Done working?"

Yuigahama was sitting in her usual seat, while Yukinoshita was in the middle of pouring tea. I sat down in my own chair and gazed at the tea on the desk. Was this what that scent and warmth had been? I hadn't seen this for a whole month, and it felt like even longer.

"It's ready, Yuigahama," Yukinoshita said when she was done setting out black tea.

On the desk was a mug printed with a sagging, apathetic-looking dog and a pretty teacup on a saucer. Each of their owners took them in hand.

There was one more serving, a Japanese teacup with Ginnie the Grue printed on it.

Steam was wafting from the handleless teacup.

"Huh? What's with this?" I figured the tea was probably for me, but I was pretty sure they'd been pouring me tea in a paper cup before.

Yuigahama and Yukinoshita both replied to my question simultaneously.

"A Christmas present!"

"It's not a good use of resources for only one of us to use paper cups."

They were not on the same page with their reasons… I turned to Yuigahama, silently asking which one of them was right. She seemed pleased, explaining excitedly, "The two of us bought it! I chose the cup style, and Yukinon chose the pattern!"

I can tell… The taste involved in the selection of a Japanese teacup, even though we drank black tea, along with the Grue-bear print, had given me the gist. But what I didn't understand was when they'd had this exchange of presents. *Hey, I never got an invitation.*

"Uh, but I didn't get you anything…," I said, scratching my cheek with an apologetic tone, being on the receiving end with nothing to return.

Setting her teacup down on her saucer, Yukinoshita said calmly, "Don't worry about it. It's just for you to use instead of a paper cup."

All right, so you're sticking with the paper cup argument until the end, huh…? Well, that was fine. Even if it was just to replace a paper cup, I wasn't stubborn or childish enough to get angry over receiving a present. "…Thanks for the cup." The thanks was quite sincere, for me.

Yuigahama replied with a smug smile. "You're welcome!"

Also, if I was going to say thanks, there was one more I had to offer. "And th…thanks…for your help…on the request, too. We pulled it off because of you two." I immediately lowered my head in a bow, then stayed like that for a while.

I'd thought I'd never make it to the end of the event, that no one would take responsibility until it was all over, but by making this request of them, we'd managed to finish it without a hitch. I didn't know if I'd managed to take personal responsibility, but I wanted to bow my head and give them the thanks they deserved.

"The request isn't over yet, is it?" Yukinoshita said to my bowed head. Not understanding her reply, I jerked it up again.

She traced the rim of her teacup with her finger, looking a little embarrassed and a little exasperated, and smiled. "…I said I'd accept your request, didn't I?"

"Uh, but that's done. What is this, some kind of riddle?" I asked.

Yukinoshita broke into a sudden, pleasant smile. "Yes, maybe it is."

Her smile and mischievous voice were angelic. She seemed different from how mature she usually came off, and I got the feeling I was seeing a side of her I'd never known before. Nonetheless, I didn't know the answer to the riddle.

Yuigahama, who'd been spacing out watching our exchange, suddenly made a tiny "Ah!" Looking nowhere in particular, she

muttered, “I…get it… Maybe you don’t need to know, Hikki.”

“What?” I tried to ask back.

But Yuigahama energetically slapped the desk and stood up. “Well, anyway! What’re we gonna do for our Christmas? Like after this? Oh, or tomorrow! It’s still Christmas! Let’s have a party!”

“Uh, no, let’s not…,” I said.

But it seemed Yuigahama had no intention of listening to my answer, and she turned to Yukinoshita. “Do you…have plans, Yukinon?” Her tone was cautious—she was probably worried about that casual, superficial conversation before, when she’d asked Yukinoshita about her Christmas plans.

But Yukinoshita responded with a peaceful yet wry little smile. “…If you’re doing something, then I’ll make the time.”

Yuigahama lit up at the answer. “Really?! Yay! Then it’s settled.”

“You’re not gonna ask me for my plans…? Or are you trying to say indirectly that I’m not invited?”

“I mean, you obviously won’t have plans, Hikki… Oh, the party! I’d like to eat your cake, Yukinon!”

“The cake you were just eating was one I made, though… And besides, I don’t want to make another. After that many, I don’t want to bake any more for a while…” Apparently, the task had been hard on her; Yukinoshita had clearly had enough.

Uh, I feel like you were pretty into it when you were making them, though…

Seeing Yukinoshita's reluctance, Yuigahama moaned. "Urgh…if you won't make them, Yukinon…then, oh, should I make one?" she said, pointing at herself proudly.

Yukinoshita's expression sank into despair. "If you say that, I'll have to make one whether I like it or not…"

"That's a really mean way to put it! Oh, then why don't we make one together?!" Yuigahama examined Yukinoshita's face with a smile, and Yukinoshita couldn't reply for a moment.

Then she seemed to give up, breathing a short sigh with a smile. "…Yes, I could consider that."

She's fallen… Looking between that broad smile and that little one, a little smirk rose to my lips as well as I looked away.

When I happened to look outside the window, the setting sun was dazzling. The last rays came in before it sank into the sea, and for the briefest moment, the room was filled with light. Still, the night would come, and the cold with it.

But today was Christmas, and I didn't mind the warmth for this one night.

If wishes can be granted, and if I could get what I want.

I'm sure I wouldn't wish for anything or want anything.

Because anything you're given is most likely fake, and you will one day lose it.

Your wishes are formless; you can't touch your desires.

And it's possible that if you do get them, you may ruin your greatest treasure.

I still don't know what happened after the ending of the story I saw on that shining stage.

Which is why I know I'll keep trying to find out.

Afterword

Hello, this is Wataru Watari.

It's spring! And spring is the season of meetings but also the season of partings. It's like, *So which is it, then?* I'd soon like to part ways with labor and meet a break, you know? Eh?

Actually, the words *So which is it, then?* pop up too often in life.

For example—deadlines! When you hear the word *deadline*, typically people think, *I have to keep them (sense of duty)*, but others will say, "Oh-ho, that's a fake schedule created to make me panic! I still have another two weeks!"

And there are other different responses to the word *deadline*. Some people will respond, "J-just a little longer (big lie)," while others will go, "That's obviously impossible (eyes rolling back)," and some people even plead, "Let me have a break already…(sob, sob)."

It may be that the meaning of words is greatly affected by the grounding and values of the one hearing them, as well as the environment they're in. And because this happens with concrete words, those used for engaging with abstract ideas will have an even greater disparity in reactions. For example, *growth* or *change* or *real*. I think if you really talk about those concepts with people, you'll find that everyone has different viewpoints on them.

So there are surprisingly few things you can communicate with words, and even when you thought you communicated something, or that something was communicated to you, it probably wasn't. In the end, the words may have been spoken purely for the benefit of the one who said them. However, I'm still writing today, despite believing a novel has to be the prime example of that.

Even so, I hope that, if even just for this time, at least, he is happy and satisfied with that.

And so this has been *My Youth Romantic Comedy Is Wrong, As I Expected*, Volume 9.

Below, the acknowledgments.

Holy Ponkan⑧. I look forward to receiving the rough drafts for the cover every volume, but with this one of Miss Hiratsuka, I was so excited, only second to the one with Komachi. Wonderful! Thank you very much.

To my editor, Hoshino: Come on, I'll make the next one easy, ga-ha-ha… I wonder how much time I've spent saying that… As always, I'm sincerely sorry. Thank you very much. Come on, I'll make the next one easy, ga-ha-ha!

Also, in the writing of this book, I made reference to "The Gift of the Magi" by O. Henry (translated by Hiroshi Yuki).

Finally, to all my readers: Thanks to you, this story has come close to its final stages. It will continue just a little longer. I'd be glad if you would stay with me to the end. Also, thanks to all your support, there will be a second season of the anime. Thank you very much.

Now then, at this point, I've run out of allotted pages, so now I will put down my pen.

On a certain day in March, while trembling in the spring storm and building a tower out of empty MAX Coffee cans,

Wataru Watari

Translation Notes

Chapter 0 … But **that room** continues to play out their routine endlessly.

1 "Why would we have to get electricity from America?" USJ is the common abbreviation for Universal Studios Japan (in Osaka). The USA is the USA.

2 A **Tosho card** is a sort of gift card you can use at various bookstores. It's only for buying books and magazines, not other products.

Chapter 1 … Once again, **Iroha Isshiki** knocks on the door.

1 "What is happiness, after all…? A home with good soy sauce?" This is a reference to an ad for soy sauce from the 1980s. It has a guy holding a bottle of soy sauce and singing, "What was happiness, again? A home with good soy sauce!"

2 "I wonder what the *kikko* in *Kikkoman* is. 'Eternally seventeen years old'?" Kikkoman is a soy sauce brand based in Chiba, Japan. Kikuko Inoue is a voice actress who jokingly claims she's seventeen years old forever.

3 "I would have liked to give her the moon and the stars and all the other Sailor Scouts…" The original gag here, rather than a *Sailor Moon* reference, is a bit of wordplay in Japanese.

Hachiman says, “I would very much like to give it to her,” replacing the *very much* with *mountain*, because *sanzan*, meaning “very much,” uses the kanji for two mountains.

4 **“I’d wish for the fortune of my pretty, cure-cure lovely honey princess and do a happiness charge!”** Cure Lovely, Cure Princess, and Cure Honey are characters from *Happiness Charge Pretty Cure!*

5 **“This world where greetings are not to be feared at all, much less a hello from a girl who might trick you into believing she actually likes you—it’s poison.”** This line is a parody of a Japanese song with a title that translates to “Poison: this world where you can’t say what you want to say.” It’s famous for being the opening theme song of the *Great Teacher Onizuka* live-action drama—*GTO* is a quirky yet inspirational show about a teacher.

6 ***“If it means exactly the same thing to exist or not, I’m gonna have to think the world really is guided by the Law of Cycles.”*** The Law of Cycles is from the magical girl anime *Puella Magi Madoka Magica*, in which the characters are tasked with erasing witches before they are born. As a result, they both do and do not exist.

7 **“*Gondo, Gondo, rain Gondo!*”** refers to the baseball player Hiroshi Gondo, who was known for pitching so frequently, he was on the mound essentially whenever it wasn’t raining.

8 ***“There is that winter festival held around Ariake.”*** Refers to Winter Comiket, which is held around that time, usually at the Tokyo Big Sight. It’s a major event for those with Ebina’s interests.

9 **“The topic had suddenly Boson-jumped.”** In *Martian Successor Nadesico*, a Boson Jump is a form of teleportation.

10 **“Did she get a special letter? I never wanted her on the**

character roster, though…" Instead of a Super Smash Bros. joke, the original Japanese here says, "Is this Meguri Kon Koi Iroha? Though it's not like we ever invited her," as a play on the manga *Inari Kon Kon Koi Iroha* (Inari, Konkon, ABCs of love), but spelled with kanji in a way that makes it read "Meguri not coming not coming, Iroha coming."

11 "A demon! A devil! An editor!" This is playing off a Japanese Internet meme based on *The Idolmaster*: "A devil! A demon! Chihiro!" Chihiro Senkawa is the producer's secretary, and she has a sweet personality. However, in fandom, some people say this is just a facade, and underneath it all, she's actually a conniving villain. The *editor* part is probably just Watari stealthily griping about his editor.

Chapter 2 … **The meeting** smoothly jumps into motion but gets nowhere.

1 "Does it have a doo, doo, doo-da-loo BGM that has a recovery effect on the community? No, that's a PokéCenter…" The jingle Hachiman refers to is the recovery tune one hears when healing their Pokémon.

2 "I can't be the butt of the joke when there's no joke… But if there was one, would that make the joke the *seme* and me the *uke*? I'm neither, though!" The original gag here is a play on *ukeru* (to find something funny) and *uke*, as in a bottom.

3 Iroha's nickname, **Irohasu**, is a brand of bottled water.

4 "Protecting one of the four corners actually makes me feel like one of the four holy beasts." The four holy beasts refer the Azure Dragon of the East (Seiryuu), Vermillion Bird of the South (Suzaku), White Tiger of the West (Byakko), and Black Turtle of the North (Genbu), all of which are prominent figures in East Asian mythology, often appearing in pop culture.

5 "Did you know, Raiden?" is a reference to the 1980s comedy/

action manga *Sakigake!! Otokojuku*. This title is the progenitor of the common *shonen* battle-manga cliché of side characters watching a fight and then explaining the moves of the participants. "Did you know, Raiden?" is a line that inevitably happens during these scenes.

6 **"That sounds like the noises Ai-chan makes when she plays table tennis."** Ai Fukuhara is a table tennis player who's famous for yelling "SAA!" when she hits the ball. In Japanese, *saa* can also be a sort of *I dunno* sound.

7 **"…but the acerbating of my spirit has long been thoroughly exacerbated to the point of reprobation."** The original gag here was a play on *suriheru* (worn down) and *surekkarashi* (shameless).

8 ***"What the heck is* re-sche*, a restaurant with great beef tongue?"*** Risuke is a beef tongue restaurant in Shinbashi. *Re-sche*, a made-up word for the English edition, is a heavy abbreviation of *rescheduling*.

9 ***"Why are these guys all using nothing but technobabble? What is this,* Mahouka*?"*** The original gag here was "Why are they using nothing but katakana? Is this Ruu Oshiba?" Almost all the business jargon in Japanese is actually loan words from English, and it gets written in katakana (an alternate phonetic alphabet frequently used for foreign words). Ruu Oshiba is an actor and comedian who writes his name with katakana, which is unusual for Japanese names.

10 ***"Recently, my sister has been unusual…"*** *Recently, My Sister Is Unusual* is the title of a step-sibling faux-incest manga.

11 **"But Mom tilted her head, gave me a blank look, and replied with a vague noise."** The original Japanese gag here is a pun on *saa* (meaning "I dunno") and the way a Japanese person would pronounce *sir*.

12 "Reserve us a tub of chicken pieces. And a cake, too." In Japan, it's common to have chicken, thanks to the power of KFC's marketing, and they usually sell out on Christmas. Cake is another Japan-made Christmas tradition that emerged postwar as a celebration of prosperity, and it is ubiquitous around the holiday season.

13 "But once I decide in my heart that I'm gonna do the chores, the deed's already been done!" This is a play on a line from Prosciutto in *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure: Golden Wind*. Of course, he's talking about murder, not chores.

14 "Besides, my dumb little sister can't be slacking on her studies" is referencing the light-novel series *My Little Sister Can't Be This Cute*, also known as *Oreimo*.

15 "I'll even flash my brake lights five times for you!" There's a common belief that this is Morse code, but it was actually popularized by a Dreams Come True song "Mirai Yosouzu II," which has the lyrics "Always flashing the brake lights five times, the sign of I love you," probably because the word *aishiteru* (I love you) has five syllables (*a-i-shi-te-ru*).

Chapter 3 … Once more, **Hachiman Hikigaya** asks himself.

1 ***"The Reality Marble that I'd learned without even realizing it, Unlimited Double Works, has activated…"*** This is a reference to the Fate series, one of the most iconic of Reality Marbles being Unlimited Blade Works, which includes a full dramatic speech that became the popular butt of a joke online.

2 "He whaled away on his MacBook Air like *clackity-clackity-SMACK*." This is a reference to a *Jigoku no Misawa* (Misawa from Hell) comic, involving a guy slamming on his keyboard. These comics generally feature obnoxious people.

3 "The Data Overmind" is an entity from *The Melancholy of*

Haruhi Suzumiya that is a conglomerate of sentient data organisms that supervise a sector of the galaxy, including Earth.

4 **"I want to know failure!"** is a quote from the professional gamer Daigo Umehara, in reference to his general dominance in the field of fighting games.

5 **"But I suppose there might be good in things, even if we don't see it!"** This line originated in the famous novel *A Little Princess* by Frances Hodgson Burnett, which had a popular 1985 anime adaptation called *Princess Sarah*. But Hachiman might be more familiar with the line in *Ghost Sweeper Mikami* from Hanato Kobato, who's known for spouting quotes from *A Little Princess*.

6 **"If this were *Japanese Folktales*…"** *Nihon Mukashibanashi* (Japanese folktales) is a long-running children's anime that began in 1975 and features adaptations of Japanese folktales. Punishment for dishonesty is a common theme in many stories.

7 **"Back then, I think there's a possibility someone told me, '*Zawsze* in love,' or I got a key or lock or something…"** These events are from the romantic comedy manga *Nisekoi: False Love*.

8 **"When Komachi was little, she called me Big Bo instead of Big Bro. I'd think for sure she was Tora-san."** The original joke here used the terms *onii-chan*, which means "big brother" and *Oi-chan*, which is the name for the protagonist's uncle in the long-running film series Otoko wa Tsurai yo (It's tough being a man), which started in 1968. The protagonist's name is Tora-san.

9 **"It felt like I would breathe a pink sigh instead."** "Momoiro Toiki" (Pink sigh) is the name of a 1992 song by Mariko Takahashi, featuring the lyrics, "Make it bloom, make it bloom, the pink sigh in your embrace, I will become a falling flower." It's a song about sex, stated very poetically.

10 **"Does Totsuka's laughter have an effect like 1/f fluctuation?"** 1/f noise is also known as pink noise and is one of

the most common signals in biological systems. Pitch and loudness fluctuations in speech and music are pink noises.

11 **“Like the futile stone towers children build in the river of purgatory.”** The legend of Sai no Kawara is a belief of Pure Land Buddhism, in which children who die prematurely will be sent to Sai no Kawara, a riverbed of souls in purgatory, where they build stone towers in hopes that they can climb out of limbo into paradise. But every day, demons of hell come to knock their towers down. Sai no Kawara is often used as a metaphor for a futile endeavor, similar to the Greek myth of Sisyphus pushing his boulder up the hill.

Chapter 4 … That’s why **Saika Totsuka** feels admiration.

1 **“So it’s a complex maiden circuit thing…”** Complex maiden circuits are a feature of marionettes (basically female androids) in *Saber Marionette J*.

2 **“You think it’s that easy? What are you talking about?! This is just carelessness!”** This is a reversal of a line in *Rurouni Kenshin* from Shishio to Saito. Shishio says, “You think I’m being careless? What are you talking about? It’s just that easy for me!”

3 **“We can still save it! We can still save it! We’ll just corporate slave it!”** The original pun here ends with “Madagascar!” which sounds like *mada tasukaru* (we can still be saved) and is from a sketch by the comedian Gor☆geous
.

4 **“It’s pamyu if you do, pamyu if you don’t! Pon pon way!”** Instead of a Kyary Pamyu Pamyu joke, the original gag here was a pun with a reference to the ending theme of the anime *Witchcraft Works*, which features the lyrics “Witches over here, witches over there!” which sounds somewhat similar to an idiom that means “Damned if you do, damned if you don’t.”

5 "Humming *Raa, ra, ra-ra, ra, ramen* ♪ like Nausicaa…" There's a tune in the Studio Ghibli film *Nausicaa of the Valley of Wind* in which a young girl sings in *la-las*, used most notably in a flashback scene.

6 "I find myself thinking maybe magic and miracles are real." This is a quote from Sayaka in *Puella Magi Madoka Magica*.

7 "…'cause I'm a human…" is a line from Geronimo in *Ultimate Muscle* (aka *Kinnikuman*), his famous quote right before he dies.

8 "It'd be crazy if Momoya started selling something like *It's Totsuka!*" Momoya is a supermarket brand that sells sauces and various canned products, with a line named things like *Gohan desu yo!* (It's food!) and *Amai desu yo!* (It's sweet!)

9 *"Hey, hey, you know what they say about a man and a woman eating yakiniku together…"* It's an old cliché that a man and a woman eating yakiniku together must be in an intimate relationship. The idea is that meat is carnal, and if the couple is eating garlic together, there's a lack of shame. It's considered rather old-fashioned now.

10 "But what's with the abbreviation *Fa-kin*? It seems kind of unfortunate." Fa-Kin is short for First Kitchen (Faasuto Kicchin), a fast-food restaurant that sells American-style food like hamburgers.

11 "If you're asking if I burst out yelling, *It's so goooood!* as lights exploded from my eyes and mouth while I swam through outer space…" Overreactions are a staple of cooking manga, but this particular overreaction is from the 1980s cooking manga *Mister Ajikko*.

Chapter 5 … **Shizuka Hiratsuka** wishes them a good future.

1 "What I had to worry about was the black company I was

heading off to now." A "black company" refers to an exploitative business but, more specifically in the white-collar sector, usually forcing young employees to work heavy overtime without pay or benefits, engaging in various forms of harassment, and threatening employees if they try to quit.

2 **"Our complacence as corporate slaves reflects the lies, gives us 'freedom' before we die of overwork…"** This is a parody of the lyrics of the first opening of the *Attack on Titan* anime: "Our complacence as livestock makes these lies flourish, gives us the 'freedom' of starving wolves."

3 **"When I eyed her, wondering if it was just a corpse…"** "No reply. It's just a corpse" is a standard dialogue line when investigating dead bodies in the Dragon Quest series.

4 **"…a perfect role for myself, the chicken!"** Hachiman says *chicken* in English, wording it like the title of *Mayoeru Shitsuji to Chikin na Ore to* (The Hesitant Butler and Myself, the Chicken), published as *Mayo Chiki!* in English. The protagonist of this light-novel series has a pathological fear of women.

Chapter 7 … Someday, **Yui Yuigahama** will…

1 **"…and then zvezdashed right out of the living room."** This is referring to both the anime *World Conquest Zvezda Plot* and the onomatopoeia for skittering and dashing about, *zvezda*.

2 **"Peter is Shinnosuke Ikehata, huh?"** Shinnosuke Ikehata is a singer, dancer, and actor, and Peter is the stage name he uses on variety shows and musical revues.

3 **"You're Hachimanure, as always."** Komachi calls Hachiman *gomiichan* (trash) in Japanese, which rhymes with *onii-chan* (big brother.)

4 **"Clearly, this was far more useless than a picture of a mochi."** A picture of a mochi is an idiom for something useless.

That is, you can't eat it.

5 **"Maybe I shouldn't be surprised that someone with Yukinoshita's tendencies is so serious about chasing a mouse that she has a meownual pussport."** The original gag here was a pun based on the anime *Non Non Biyori*. "Using a *nenpasu* (annual passport), is Yukinon *non biyori non*? *Nenpasuuu*." *Non non biyori* is a very unique and slangy way to describe taking it easy, while *non* is a regional accent thing. In *Non Non Biyori*, the protagonist has a nonsensical greeting of *nyanpasu* (translated as "meowning").

6 **"People will enviously complain, *So Chiba people often hold their coming-of-age ceremonies at Destiny Land, huh?* but that's only in Urayasu city."** Urayasu, a city in Chiba prefecture, is where the Tokyo Disney Resort—er, Destiny Resort—is located.

7 **"They were in such perfect unison that I wanted to tell them, 'Nice coupling.'"** Hachiman says "Nice coupling" in English, a reference to the anime *Buddy Complex*, a giant robot show that involves psychological links called coupling. *Nice coupling*, said all in English, is a term from that show and the name of the second episode.

8 **"Oh, friend of my heart!"** is something Gian from *Doraemon* often says. Usually, he plays the antagonist as a petty bully, but in the movies, he'll often call Nobita a friend and join up with him to help out.

9 ***"So this is the* Reconguista in G…"** *Reconguista in G* is a Gundam installment. The *G* is supposed to be for *Gundam*, but also for *ground*, and *reconquista* means "reconquest" in Spanish.

10 **"Well, Land is kind of eh around this time of year, but what about the newer one next door?"** Hachiman is referring to "Destiny" Sea.

Chapter 8 … And then **Yukino Yukinoshita**…

1 **"…and a perfect Demon Superhuman…"** The Demon Superhumans, or *Akuma Choujin*, is a type of *choujin* from *Ultimate Muscle*. They reside in the demon realm, their race founded by Satan.

2 **"Did she hear the word *like* and think this was a confession?"** In the original, Hachiman asks if Isshiki was making an anagram out of "don't worry about it," which is *ki ni sunnatte* in Japanese and can be rearranged to include the word *kiss* (*kisu*).

Chapter 9 … Of her own accord, **Iroha Isshiki** takes a step.

1 **"I'm not so important enough to tell others what to do, and I don't understand the pounding of my heart…"** This is referencing some lyrics from an opening of the *Detective Conan* anime, "Mune Ga Dokidoki" (My heart is pounding): "I'm not important, and I'm not great, either. What I understand is the pounding of my heart."

2 ***"I'll give the one who answered correctly eighty thousand points! (Because I'm Hachiman.)"*** Hachiman's name also sounds like the number eighty thousand in Japanese.

3 **"Yukinoshita's got some devil ears straight from hell…"** *Jigokumimi* (hell ears) is an idiom for great hearing, but this instance is also referencing the lyrics to the original *Devilman* anime's opening theme, "Song of the Devilman": "His devil ears are *jigokumimi* / straight from hell."

4 **"…Takashi from the math textbook…"** Takashi is a fairly common Japanese name, and one that you'll always see at least once in elementary school math textbook problems. And sometimes the example questions he appears in become rather absurd, leading to the jokes about Takashi's wild exploits.

5 **"Man, elementary schoolers really are the best!"** This is a quote from Subaru, the protagonist of the loli light-novel series *Ro-Kyu-Bu!* by Sagu Aoyama. Subaru is a teenage lolicon and coach for a sixth-grade all-girls basketball team.

6 ***"Get on out there, you! And then do Aikatsu with me!"*** A quote from Johnny Kitagawa, president of Johnny & Associates, that is famous partially because the *you* is said in English. Johnny & Associates is a prominent talent agency that produces boy bands and male idols, and they're behind some of the biggest pop stars in Japan. *Aikatsu!* is a TCG about idol stars.

7 **"I'm also an admiral and a Love-Liver."** Hachiman is talking about *Kantai Collection* and Love Live, respectively. The latter is also an idol-based franchise, while the former is a game about battleships, but they're anthropomorphized, so it's all about managing cute girls, in the end.

8 ***"…like how in the PreCure movies, you can use the Miracle Lights to support them?"*** Miracle Lights are wands that supporting characters use to help the girls in the Pretty Cure movies. Of course, you can buy real-life replicas of these wands to use in the movie theater.

Chapter 10 … **The lights in each of their palms** illuminate…

1 **"Okopon"** is the nickname for the restaurant Okonomiyaki Honpo, and it almost sounds like an SFX. Zaimokuza is making weird noises again.

2 ***"I'm almost as uneasy about this as I would be about a kid's first errand…"*** It's common for Japanese children to be sent out on errands at very young ages, like four or so, and a child's first errand is a bit of a celebrated event. There's a TV show called *My First Errand* that shows real children going out to perform these tasks.

3 “Morusua” is the cry of a mutilated Furby, an American electronic toy, from an online story about someone who chopped off the head of their Furby.

4 “I’ll never forget this performance today!” is a quote from the producer in *The Idolmaster Movie: Beyond the Brilliant Future!*

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3: Once more, **Hachiman Hikigaya** asks himself.
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